

The Island of Crossed Destinies
human and other-than-human perspectives in
Afro-Cuban divination

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2011

I, Anastasios Panagiotopoulos, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own and I am the sole composer of it. I also confirm that the work has not been submitted for any other degree or professional qualification.

Abstract

This thesis focuses on the significance and articulation of divinatory practices in Cuba—a place where a number of different religious traditions (mainly of African and European origins) have come to coexist. Reflecting on the particularities of my ethnography, I concentrate on three such traditions: *Ocha/Ifá*, *Palo Monte* and *Espiritismo*. However, rather than engaging with them as different ‘traditions’ or assuming their syncretic character, I attempt to explore the way in which they constitute distinct but related perspectives on human destiny or, as my friends and informants put it, on people’s ‘path’ (*camino*)—perspectives, that is, which continuously constitute and recalibrate each other.

Echoing the work of authors such as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, I try to illustrate the nature of these perspectives by bringing to the fore the ways in which different divinatory practices instantiate and embody the efficacy or ‘point of view’ of different ‘other-than-human’ beings—be they deities or the dead. Thus, while in the case of *Ocha/Ifá* and its oracles, I concentrate on the relation between ‘humans’ and the *orichas* (deities), my discussion of divinatory practices within *Palo Monte* and *Espiritismo* places the emphasis on the relation between ‘humans’ and various kinds of the dead (*muertos*).

Treating these relations as an exchange of perspectives between ‘humans’ and ‘other-than-human’ entities, I argue for the need to focus on ‘ontology’ and the indigenous understanding of these entities’ ‘nature’ in order to avoid both ‘reductionist’ and ‘constructivist’ renderings of divination; in other words, to avoid the theoretical limits of ‘syncretic’ or ‘purist’ readings of the (Afro-)Cuban spirit world and its efficacy. This emphasis on ‘ontology’ leads me to construe divination as ‘perspectivism’ and to treat it as both a theoretical strategy and an ethnographic challenge.

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Acknowledgements

I consider this thesis to be the culmination of a long personal and academic journey in which I had the privilege to be supported by many individuals and institutions.

My academic formation began in Greece, in the Department of Sociology of the University of Crete to which I would like to express my gratitude. Particularly, I owe a debt of gratitude to academics, Maria Gianissopoulou, Myron Acheimastos, Kostas Gounis, Eleni Fournaraki and Stavros Kostadakopoulos, as well as friends and colleagues, Thanos Markianidis, Dimitris Sideris, Thomas Kiaos, Padelis Makris, Maria Kochliou, Katerina Paouri, Katerina Vetta and Katerina Stefopoulou.

My deepest regards go to the warm and intellectually stimulating environment of the Department of Social Anthropology of the University of Edinburgh, all its members of staff, colleagues and friends, as well as the College of Humanities and Social Sciences for funding my Ph.D. I would like to thank particularly the late Charles Jedrej, as well as Magnus Course, Joost Fontein, Sue Renton, Hyunchul Kim, Miltos Hadjiosif, Maria Tzika, Vasiliki Apostolopoulou, Aggeliki Mitropoulou, Rebecca Rotter and Naomi Richards. During my long stay in Edinburgh, I have also benefited from the invaluable friendship and companionship of Evangelos Chrysagis, Maria Stathopoulou, Elpida Pavlidou, Yakov Boglev, Giorgos Karagiannakis, Tijana Rakic, James Pattison and Michelle Lloyd. Special thanks for her friendship, intellectual nourishment and for smoothening the ‘Greekness’ of this thesis, to Angela Riviere.

During my stay in Cuba many people made it a doubly welcoming place. I owe debts of gratitude to the Cuban Institute of Anthropology (*Instituto Cubano de Antropología*) as my host institution, and especially Rafael Robaina, Nelly Esposito and Lazarito; foreign researchers and academics who, have since become friends, Diana Espirito Santo, Ana Stela Cunha, Geraldine Morel, Katerina Kerestetzi and Valerio Simoni. My warm regards also go to fellow ‘yumas’ Grigoris Tassiopoulos and Yesenia. Last, but not least, all those Cubans who, in one way or another, offered their support and friendship, particularly, Elmer, Leonel and Omar, Leo and Dorka, Celia and her family, Zenaida and her family, Angelito, Tato Quiñones, Victor

Betancourt, Guzmán '*el hijo*', Armando Ferrer Castro, Magalis, Fran, Natalia Bolívar and Natasha, Emilia, Yodania and Juan Carlos, Rosi and Pedro, Yunaika and her family, Zuri, Omar, Irina, Sergio, Alberto, Luis and Marialena.

I would also like to thank Professor Jonathan Spencer, for his general support over the years and for accepting to examine my thesis; Dr. Martin Holbraad, for also accepting to examine this thesis and whose work on Afro-Cuban divination has been a deep source of inspiration.

My debt also runs deep and wide to Dr. Richard Baxstrom, for supervising my thesis, his valuable comments and support, as well as friendship.

A simple but enormous thank you to my mother, Maria Paganopoulou, father, Takis Panagiotopoulos, and immensely loving and loved partner, Angela Maria Ojeda Ruiz; also to my 'good old' friends, Nikos Tzartzanis and Giorgos Pouleas.

There are not enough words, either in English or Greek, to describe and convey my infinite appreciation and affection for my supervisor, mentor, and friend, Dr. Dimitri Tsintjilonis. I consider myself extremely fortunate that our paths crossed.

The square is now entirely covered with cards and with stories. My story is also contained in it, though I can no longer say which it is, since their simultaneous interweaving has been so close. In fact, the task of deciphering the stories one by one has made me neglect until now the most salient peculiarity of our way of narrating, which is that each story runs into another story, and as one guest is advancing his strip, another, from the other end, advances in the opposite direction, because the stories told from left to right or from bottom to top can also be read from right to left or from top to bottom, and vice versa, bearing in mind that the same cards, presented in a different order, often change their meaning, and the same tarot is used at the same time by narrators who set forth from the four cardinal points (Excerpt taken from Italo Calvino's *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*; 1977:41).

Foreword

Reflecting back on my academic ‘career’, such as it is, there seem to have been apparently frequent changes in my interests and pursuits. I started with an undergraduate degree in Sociology at the University of Crete, Greece, which culminated in a thesis examining the notion of ‘ideology’ in the work of Karl Marx, and especially his book *The German Ideology*. At the same time, in the last two years of my degree, I was initiated into Social Anthropology, taking courses offered by anthropologists in the department, such as an introduction to social anthropology, ritual and religion, and two courses which required conducting small fieldwork projects; one on the night-bars of inner city Athens, which were frequented mainly by African immigrants, and another on the social uses of pavements in Koulouri, the capital town of the island of Salamina, Greece. My next step was a Masters degree in Social Anthropology at Edinburgh University, with a thesis written on ‘urban anthropology’. Taking a year off to contemplate my future plans and reflecting on my interest in the comparative study of ritual and religion (I had undertaken a further course in this at Edinburgh), I realised that this was where my interest lay. It was then that I decided to pursue my Ph.D.

I was particularly interested in religious phenomena that was not totally influenced by the so-called ‘big’ monotheistic religions, but had a more ‘local’ and ‘exotic’ flavour. My gaze towards Cuba was somewhat slowly and arbitrarily directed. Language was an important factor as I was already fluent in Spanish, but, retrospectively at least, there seem to have been a number of threads that wove my academic path together: Marx, ‘African culture’ (however general and ambiguous this may now sound), urban settings, and, finally, ritual and religion, they all seem to have met, in what became the field of my research for about 14 months, between 2006 and 2007, when I set out to acquire first-hand experience of Afro-Cuban religious and oracular traditions in Havana, Cuba.

I commence this thesis by providing a broad socio-historical context of Cuba, the Afro-Cuban religious traditions and the research conducted on them from past to present. I, then, mention some points of reference that have inspired me and

conclude by giving a very broad outline of the whole thesis and its enquiries. The rest of the chapters continue to weave together some of the threads that have been with me since the very beginning of this journey in Crete.

INTRODUCTION

‘Me and you are complete strangers...’

Not many weeks have passed since myself and my partner, Angela, arrived in Havana with the plan to stay for at least a year and, as far as I am concerned, conduct fieldwork on the Afro-Cuban religious traditions, with a specific focus on their divinatory and oracular dimensions. We have already relatively settled in by finding a flat to rent, acquiring a general sense of the city and establishing some initial formal (those institutions that would host us and thus make possible our long stay in Cuba) and informal contacts. After a prolonged and extremely hot and humid early October afternoon, we decided to take a stroll in our neighbourhood in Vedado, a former well-off residential area just off the centre of Havana that stretches along its north-western coastal line. We were accompanied by a Mexican woman who was studying medicine in Cuba and lived in a rented apartment owned by our landlady's daughter and her husband. Showing us around Vedado's wide streets, full of tropical vegetation, beautiful, although rundown, colonial-style buildings and many small parks, we stopped to have a rest at a big square, where a bronze, life-size statue of John Lennon had been placed, in a sitting position, on one of the benches. I observed that John Lennon was missing an almost signature object, his thin, round, metallic glasses. Our Mexican friend informed us that his glasses used to adorn his face but, as people would repeatedly steal them, a person was appointed to keep them, and whenever a tourist wished to take a photo, only then would they be temporarily placed on the musician's still face. John Lennon's rather post-modern monument was the outcome of a relatively recent re-evaluation of Western popular culture, which was subsequently deemed not necessarily a vehicle of 'Yankee' (meaning, imperialist and capitalist) ideals. It was then, our Mexican friend commented, that the leading member of the Beatles was offered a seat on one of Cuba's socialist benches.

As we were just about to make our way back to our flat, and in the same square where John Lennon, with his vision impaired was sitting, our paths crossed with a middle-aged man whose lazy pace came to a halt in front of us. He looked

directly at our friend and in a very gentle but also self-assured manner said to her: ‘Me and you are complete strangers; please excuse my intrusiveness, but I have to tell you that you suffer from a gynaecological problem in your ovaries, which might create future complications in your attempts to get pregnant.’ Taking a tiny sealed bag out of his pocket he added: ‘Keep this always with you except when you are menstruating. This is important to remember, don’t ever have contact with it during the days when you have your period. If you do as I say, it will help you with your problem.’ The three of us were stunned into silence. Our friend, after overcoming her surprise, in tears, thanked the man and, each of us continued on our way. She admitted to us that she did indeed have gynaecological problems that the man had alluded to; she put the small gift into her pocket. Three years have passed, and all of us have long since left Cuba. We recently learned from our Mexican friend that she had finally managed to get pregnant with twins but, unfortunately, she had had a miscarriage.

This brief incident is quite illustrative of a general tendency among many Cubans I met, of, what I call, ‘oracular propensity’. Messages of a significant and pertinent content are occasionally exchanged, often among strangers, and either in extremely spontaneous ways and instances—as the one above, or in dreams, or in more private occasions—or in more organized ways, often being part of a complex ritual and cosmological nature. Even public figures do not escape this general ‘propensity’, especially since at the beginning of the Revolution, the would-be *comandante en jefe*, Fidel Castro, who was captured by the Batista regime in 1953, proclaimed in a seemingly divinatory fashion that ‘history [would] absolve [him]’ (Castro Ruz 1997). The present thesis is meant to provisionally isolate, within this general propensity, those instances in which significant messages are passed on among people, but are said to be ultimately stemming from, what is generally depicted as, ‘the beyond’ (*el mas allá*) and more specifically from a variety of ‘spiritual entities’. For the latter, following Hallowell (1960), I adopt the term ‘other-than-human persons’ or entities, although their alterity from humans does not place them in an absolute plane of transcendence or unbridgeable distance. On the contrary, and as divination seems to suggest, these entities constantly make their

appearance in many peoples' lives, informing and transforming them. At the same time, the entities' messages also give information about themselves.

To a large extent, this thesis is dealing with providing indigenous definitions of these entities, suspending as much as possible an intuitive urge, from the academic point of view, to quickly proceed into a kind of interpretation that would render the entities more intelligible in those all-familiar terms that the social sciences, and those involved in them, have become all too familiar with (such as social structure or function, for example). Very often this kind of familiarization tends to reduce them into a kind of 'symbolic', 'representational' and 'constructivist' materialization of an ultimately, and again from the academic point of view, purely human and social nature.

My effort is to provide a theoretical engagement with such phenomena that takes seriously peoples' claims of the truth of them, not in order to argue that they are true, but in order to produce a narrative that does not presuppose that they are not; a narrative that speaks *through* their truth (see Henare *et.al.* 2007). Indigenous definitions of what exists (and what does not) are, therefore, 'ontological' in nature, and by providing an anthropological narrative that takes them as seriously as possible, this in its turn, is also ontological. This is why the theoretical intentions and conclusions of the anthropologist may be so tightly linked to the ethnography presented to him or her: 'their' ontology is, or can be, 'our' methodology.

I have been present in many a discussion where the term 'ontology' (often linked to 'cosmology') has been invoked, causing what I can only describe as an allergic reaction to it. Among others, the term is meant to depict an intellectual construction and classification of 'things' (*a la* Durkheim and Mauss; see Durkheim and Mauss 1969) that are consequently enacted, that is, a system of beliefs that produces certain, and because of the former, limited actions. Congruent with this may be the understanding that if different ontologies exist then humanity is radically divided along the terms of them. In other words, many critical reactions towards the term argue that it comes to denote an absolute differentiation among peoples in a much more radical, yet similar, sense than the word 'culture' would do. But, as Holbraad has warned us, 'ontology' is not (or should not be) another word for 'culture' (2008b); alluding to the 'relativistic' understandings of it I just mentioned.

I believe that the word ontology is not necessarily to be identified with the above negative reactions towards it. When my friend Celia, for instance, told me that ‘her’ spirits of the dead accompany her and reveal things she could not have known otherwise (see chapter 3), she was not depicting a radically different world from mine, in which I did not perceive the presence of such spirits; our difference was not predicated on a general view and perception of the world, but on the fact that she perceived a world, the same world I did, but she shared this world with the spirits of the dead, whilst I did not (consciously at least). This is what made the difference; a significant one, but not an absolute and total one.

Most, if not all, of the accounts on Afro-Cuban religiosity (see below), tend to approach it in terms of explicitly distinct ‘traditions’. There is hardly any unified interpretation of them, and ethnographically researchers whilst acknowledging the phenomenon have failed to account for, in any satisfactory way, the fact that many people in Cuba engage with more than one of these traditions. This leads them to either implicitly or explicitly understand the relations between them in ‘syncretic’ terms, that is, as a sign of ‘inauthenticity’ or ‘contamination’: ‘[T]he infiltration of a supposedly ‘pure’ tradition by symbols and meanings seen as belonging to other, incompatible traditions’ (Stewart and Shaw 1994:1). My focus on ‘other-than-human’ entities, indigenous understandings and perceptions of them and their perspectives seeks to bypass the limitations of the search for ‘pure’ origins and the emphasis on ‘syncretic’ blendings in order to illuminate the efficacy of these entities and the character of the traditions that embrace them.

Seeking to explore the context that these entities offer and their perspectives both of themselves and of humans, I focus on the instances in which the former communicate with the latter; that is, instances of divination. I employ the words ‘divination’ (*adivinación*), ‘oracles’ (*oráculos*), ‘the beyond’ (*el mas allá*), and even ‘ritual’ (*ritual*), ‘religion’ (*religión*) and ‘religiosity’ (*religiosidad*) not so much as analytical tools that will extensively be constructed and deconstructed or in the pursuit of an adequate definition of them, as is often the case.¹ Rather, I employ them because Cubans do and as the familiarity between the English and the Spanish for these terms is so obvious, I believe that we do not get lost in translation, at least not

¹ For relevant discussions, see Asad 1993; Bell 1992; Durkheim 2008; Eliade 1987; Evans-Pritchard 1970; Geertz 1973; Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994; Lambek 2002; Marx 1982; Pals 1996; Smith 1991.

so much if we are using these as a starting point and common ground of understanding.

To be ‘religious’ (*religioso*) does not automatically signify embracing beliefs and practices of a specific tradition; due to its colonial past (see below), Cuba is a place where various religious traditions coexist and not in isolation but often in vivid interrelation. The most prominent ones are Christianity (mainly Catholicism, but also Protestantism, which has seen a recent increase; see Ramírez Calzadilla 2006:60-65), ‘Spiritism’ (*Espiritismo*) and those of ‘African origin’, the most diffused being *Ocha/Ifá* or else *Santería* (of Yoruba origin) and *Palo Monte* (of Congo-Bantu origin). When an individual claims to be ‘religious’ this might signify either one of all these or a combination, often quite idiosyncratic, of more than one. In the vast majority of the existent bibliography, when the syncretic character of Afro-Cuban religious traditions is mentioned, it is most often taken to refer to their (especially *Santería*) coexistence and interrelations with Catholicism.²

An extensive account based on rich ethnographic description and analysis of the relationship between Catholicism and Afro-Cuban religious traditions is still to be written, leaving the term syncretism itself unexplored and therefore highly problematic in this context. Maybe this stems partially from the ethnographic fact that nowadays people who actively engage with both do not seem, in the ritual context at least, to blend them so much but, nevertheless, accept their distinct ‘truths’. In any case, this thesis is not dealing with this phenomenon, but explores the specificities and interrelations of extremely diffused and popular traditions other than Christianity; these are *Ocha/Ifá*, *Palo Monte* and *Espiritismo*. Nevertheless, and as I said before, I also move beyond readings of these traditions that solidify them into rigid and dogmatic cosmological ‘wholes’, by focusing on describing what other-than-human entities appear and how they are invoked through them during divination. By turning the former into the background of description and analysis, and by bringing to the fore the ethnographic experiences of contact with these entities through divination, I also hope to account for the progressive dissemination of these traditions outside their initial sources (‘African’ for *Ocha/Ifá* or *Palo Monte*

² Even the very term *Santería* denotes its Spanish-Catholic influence, coming from the word ‘saint’ (*santo*) implying a correlation between its deities—the *orichas*—and the Catholic saints.

and ‘European’ for *Espiritismo*), and present a more encompassing (Afro-)Cuban cosmos, without reducing them to race, social and economical status or individual political inclinations.

The situation I was met with in Cuba strongly suggested that, although certain correlations with the above factors existed and still might persist, these were not as prominent and obvious as they were in Cuba’s pre-revolutionary past. My friends and informants could be of any ‘colour’, and ranged in economic status from those in extreme poverty to those with relative affluence (although never excessive). In any case, due to the Revolution’s attempts to smoothen, if not overcome, radical class, social and race divisions, as well as the economic crisis of the 1990s, following the fall of the Soviet bloc, that has deeply affected almost the whole of the population, the above issues prove to be so complex that they would require a different kind of thesis altogether, one in which Afro-Cuban religiosity would have to come a poor second, if it managed to be present at all.

Although reliable statistical figures are lacking, there is a general and diffused consensus, both among academics (see, for example, Espirito Santo 2009a:30-40; Holbraad 2004; Ramírez Calzadilla 2006) and in ‘everyday’ talk, that religiosity, and especially Afro-Cuban religiosity, has been on the increase in the last few decades, and even more so since the 1990s. Many link this to the economic crisis itself but also to the fact that religious expression is treated much more positively by the regime (see below), implying that the ‘religious boom’ (Ramírez Calzadilla 2006:13-28) of the 1990s was at least predicated on the fact that there was much more ‘religious’ freedom. Again, the complexity of these issues cannot lead to hasty assumptions-cum-conclusions, and although they may be valid sociologically speaking, they do not fully describe what *my* interests in these phenomena are, namely, the relations of intimacy instantiated between humans and other-than-humans; an intimacy which lies at the centre of my understanding and this thesis.

Appreciating the significance of this intimacy, I had to find my way through Havana’s informal networks, in neighbourhoods, through friends and their friends, and wait for the famous ethnographic ‘snow-ball effect’ to occur; and it did rather easily and quickly! Everybody knew a *religioso*, either in the family, in the neighbourhood, a friend or a colleague at work. The places I was more often led to

were private houses. No large and official ceremonies occurred outside them; there were no public temples specifically for them. Yet, in their own subtle ways, they were everywhere; fruits under a tree, a decapitated chicken floating on the sea-shore, a small, wrapped paper-package at a crossroads, a colourful necklace or bracelet on a passer-by, they, and many more, were all signs of ‘the Cuba profound’ (*la Cuba profunda*; see James Figarola 2001:184).

I also came to realize quite quickly that many people were involved in ‘the religion’ (*la religión*; referring to all indistinctively) because of, and with a great reliance on its capacity to reveal significant viewpoints about their lives that remained somewhat hidden, as well as to ‘pragmatically’ engage with their aspirations, hopes, desires, fears and obstacles. Rather than just posing deep existential questions to reflect upon or creating a universal moral ethos, they were very much praised for ‘resolving’ (*resolver*) as earthly a matter as a headache, a problematic love affair or a financial calamity. In all these issues, divination, as the means of acquiring information and changing one’s life, was soon presented to me as an extremely vital phenomenon, and rich in its complexity. Consequently, and almost inevitably, it became my main ethnographic ‘site’, and I concentrated on accounts of it and the instances in which it occurred. Rather than picking up a particular tradition, I embraced all of them, as many of my friends did, and focused on their divinatory dimensions. Each tradition had its own diviners of renown, and more than this, a person of renown within each tradition was quintessentially a diviner as well. In *Ocha/Ifá* there were the *santeros*, the *santeras* and the *babalawos*; in *Palo Monte* the *paleros* and in *Espiritismo* the *espiritistas*. Each tradition, in the context of divination, was meant to invoke different kinds of entities, such as the *orichas* in *Ocha/Ifá*, and different kinds of (spirits of) ‘the dead’ (*muertos*) in *Palo Monte* and *Espiritismo*. Thus, there seemed to be a broad Afro-Cuban spirit world that people were eager to invoke and enter into dialogue with that could not be isolated as belonging to only one of these traditions. This thesis is an effort to confront this world and to illustrate both its distinctive and encompassing aspects. However, before continuing on to mentioning some points of inspiration for this thesis and providing an outline of each chapter, I want to place the Afro-Cuban religious traditions in a broad socio-historical context, both in terms of the general milieu in

which they have evolved and in their treatment by the successive regimes of Cuba, and academics.

Socio-historical context

By inserting the Afro-Cuban religious traditions into a socio-historical context, one is inevitably led to deal with a social group as complex, diverse, transforming, real and imagined, as that of the so-called ‘Afro-Cubans’. Approaching them in a conventional historical fashion, from past to present, one is also led to commence the account from the subsequent to the ‘discovery’ of the Americas (1492) and the expansion of the slave trade, which served as the vehicle for the importation of thousands of people, especially from the African continent. The degree to which practices and worldviews deemed as ‘Afro’ in the New World are indeed ‘African’ has constituted a lively debate, both within academic circles, and those groups characterized, by insiders or outsiders, as ‘Afro’ (see for example Ayorinde 2004; Bascom and Herskovits 1959; Brown 2003a; Palmié 1995a, 2001, 2008; Thompson 1983). Nevertheless, few would openly and unproblematically argue that phenomena such as the Afro-Cuban religious traditions would present themselves as such, or even exist, if it were not for the strong African presence in certain parts of the New World, such as Cuba, historically ignited by the transatlantic slave trade.

Even a quick glance at the social history of religious traditions of African origin in the New World, would make one aware of the fact that the closer we get to the early colonial era (late 15th and 16th century) the more these traditions are linked to particular groups characterized along the lines of, first, their ethnicity—although mediated by the biased and confused colonial documentation and the huge diversity of African peoples—and, second, their New World social status, that is, their position as slaves. With the progressive transformation of these groups, even in the colonial and slavery era, into free people, we become witnesses to a much more complex phenomenon. On the one hand, the descendants of slaves tended to initially occupy the lower classes with slow mobility towards the middle and even, in exceptional cases, the upper ones. On the other hand, ‘things Afro’ such as religious practices and worldviews started disseminating into (or ‘contaminating’ when viewed negatively; see for example Ortiz 2001) a much wider part of the society,

embracing, in one way or another, groups that were traditionally linked to the ‘white’ population from which initially the ruling classes were mostly composed. They themselves also underwent transformations on various sociological and demographic levels (see Ayorinde 2004).

The case of the Afro-Cuban religious traditions is not alien to the above broad sketch; yet, each country presents us with its own socio-historical particularities. Thus, what I will briefly go through is the development of the Afro-Cuban religions along the documented history of Cuba, from the colonial era to the present, as well as an equally broad sketch of how they have been approached and treated by successive regimes and academics. I will follow a somewhat conventional path of presenting Cuba’s history in general, and more specifically through the lenses of the Afro-Cuban religious traditions. By doing so, I divide Cuba’s historical periods into three major ones, the colonial era (1511-1898), the years of Cuba as a republic (or ‘pseudo-republic’, as the Revolution has liked to call it), followed by Independence (1902-1958), and, finally, the Revolution (1959-present). The most systematic research on Afro-Cuban religions can be traced to the beginning of the 20th century with the advent of Independence, initiated by the prolific work of the most renowned Cuban ethnographer, Fernando Ortiz. There was a relative slowing down in the early years of the Revolution and a proliferation of published works after the 1990s, both by Cubans and foreigners.

(a) The colonial era (1511-1898)

From the beginning of the Spanish colonial rule (1511) until the middle of the 18th century, Cuba remained somewhat in the background of economic activity in comparison to other promising lands of the New World that the Spanish Crown had already begun to exploit. It mainly served as a passage that connected these other areas with Spain itself (see Ayorinde 2004: 25; Gott 2005:19-20). It was in this early colonial period, nevertheless, that a very important institution was born, and which would serve in the future as a crucial space where the Afro-Cuban religions would take shape, and be partially preserved and transformed, the so-called *cabildos* (literally meaning ‘town councils’; Brown 2003a:35). These were associations which were organized along broad ethnic or tribal lines and whose members were free slaves or descendants of them (Ayorinde 2004:9-10).

What is now referred to as *cabildos* was an aggregate of official and semi-official institutions organized along some basic general lines. They were clubs of recreation, mutual aid societies, brotherhoods or religious fraternities with certain social functions. These societies had already existed on Spanish (and Portuguese) soil since the 13th and 14th centuries, mostly known as *cofradías* (see Brandon 1993:70; Brown 2003a:34). The *cofradías* in Spain were often formed in terms of professions (something like guilds) and also local identity. What pervaded the majority of them was an attachment to Catholicism, often through the veneration of specific saints, religious indoctrination, catechism, acts of charity and social services—such as helping the sick and the poor and conducting funerals—and carrying out public ceremonies, processions and religious festivities according to the Catholic calendar. The institution of *cofradías* or *cabildos* was transposed to the Spanish colonies of the New World initially for the ‘white’ settlers. Very soon, though, it extended to those who formed the bulk of the slavery-derived labour force, especially those who came from various parts of the African continent. This, it has been argued, occurred for various reasons; among others, it was a strategic move by the Spanish Crown to ‘divide-and-rule’, dividing in such way the slave population in order to fritter away any potential coiling of a solid and highly conscious body of ‘Africans’ and slaves against the colonial rule (see Ayorinde 2004:9-10; Brown 2003a:34). Also, the *cabildos* could function as a mild way of evangelizing the ‘animistic’ Africans and lead to their Catholicization as a way of (ideological) integration into the Spanish Crown (Brandon 1993:70)—strategy that was initially designed for the diverse localities of the Iberian peninsula before and especially after the expulsion of the Moors (Ayorinde 2004:11).

In Cuba, the ‘African’ *cabildos* that emerged were commonly known as *cabildos negros*, *cabildos africanos*, or *cabildos de nación* (for a comprehensive and detailed account on them, see Howard 1998). In the beginning, since the 16th century, their membership consisted of African born people, who in their majority had already obtained their freedom. Often, *cabildos* raised funds to buy certain people out of slavery. In comparison to the Spanish *cofradías*, the *cabildos africanos* were less institutionalized, more civic than religious (that is, Catholic), although each had a specific patron saint and shrine dedicated to it. They tended to function more as clubs

and mutual aid societies. Another important characteristic was that they divided the African population into ‘nations’ (*naciones*), these referring to broad agglomerations of ethnic or tribal groups which simultaneously preserved and redefined identities stemming from Africa. Each *cabildo* had its own institutionalized hierarchy headed by the ‘king’ (*rey*) or else ‘overseer’ (*capataz*) or ‘president’ (*presidente*) and his ‘queen’ (*reina*). They served as the ‘ambassadors’ (*embajadores*) of each *cabildo* to the colonial authorities, especially the police and the church (Brandon 1993:71; Brown 2003a:35).

Being organized along these generic lines, each *cabildo* was distinguished by different symbols and practices, such as dances, rhythms, drums, songs, language, colours, flags, a Catholic patron saint, and in general ‘traditions’ that made each ‘nation’ stand out (see Brandon 1993:71; Brown 2003a:49). In this process, ‘nations’ came to be identified as *Lucumí* (the then predominant ethnonym for Yoruba), Congo, Arará or *Carabalí* (from the Calabar region; see Brown 2003b), for example. *Cabildos* enjoyed a relative freedom, especially in the enclosed confines of their buildings, to express themselves in their own ‘African way’. It is an already established and almost certainly valid suggestion, based heavily on accounts of foreign travellers and other first-hand witnesses and also documents as well as objects collected through the authorities’ interaction—sometimes oppressive—with the *cabildos*, that the latter served as incubators of, among others, religious practices following certain ‘African’ styles, no matter how transformed and redefined they might have been in this totally new (world) social context (see Brown 2003a:25-61). It can also be comfortably argued that different nations had distinctive cosmological pools to draw from and reconstruct.

It was in the mid-18th century that Cuba stepped bravely into the fore of colonial economic activity and transformed into one of the main sugar producers. This consequently led to a bigger need for labour and a dramatic increase of slave imports, mainly from Africa (Gott 2005:23-26, 36-38). Two important factors are said to have contributed to such a change; first, the ‘Seven Years’ War’ and, second, Haiti’s dramatic independence. The ‘Seven Year’s War’ of Spain along with France against Britain resulted in the latter occupying Havana for almost a year (1762-1763). Apart from economic growth and more slaves flowing into the island, this

period was also characterized by a more racially divided society, subsequent slave revolts (often plotted in the *cabildos*) and also the first plots against the Spanish metropolis for independence (Ayorinde 2004:25-26). Haiti's independence (1791) was gained by the slaves themselves and created the first and last black republic of the New World, which left a huge impact, of both awe and fear, on future generations, especially across the Caribbean. The most pragmatic and immediate one was that it contributed to Cuba's ascendance as a sugar economy requiring a large number of slaves.

From that period onwards Cuba becomes witness to certain important changes, initially as sparks, conflicting tendencies among others and, finally, as vehicles of the second large historical period I previously identified. To name but a few, we have a more clearly stratified society, broadly divided between two extremes, the white population of Spanish descent and the black of an African one, occasional slave revolts, and ideas (which often led to plots and attempts) of independence. In this climate, the official regime adopted a more repressive attitude towards the black population, which often led to a restriction of their cultural and religious expressions. The previous and relative free expression of 'African ways of life' such as religious ceremonies casually conducted in the *cabildos* and more rarely publicly (such as the 'Day of the Kings'; see Brown 2003a:35-39) were banned after certain uprisings took place, such as the 'Escalera Conspiracy' in 1844. Haiti's independence had already marked the consciousness of the Cubans, positively, as an inspiration and, negatively, as a fear of national independence and slave emancipation. At the same time, international pressure, especially from Britain, for the abolition of slavery increased. In 1868 the 'Ten Years' War' broke out between Cubans supporting independence and the Spanish authorities. It ended in 1878 with the 'Pact of Zanjón', where slaves were freed in the liberated territories. Another war broke out from 1879 to 1880, the so-called 'Little War' (*Guerra Chiquita*). Around 1886 slavery was almost coming to an end. The 'Second War of Independence' started in 1895 and ended in 1898 with the taking over of Cuba by the US, which had contributed to the war against the Spanish Crown. Formerly, an important commercial ally of Cuba, the US now actively interfered in the political and economical organization of the island. The annexationist and interventionist appetites

of the US, supported by certain circles in Cuba, became evident in the 'Platt Amendment', signed in 1902 (see Gott 2005:110-112), and the huge investment and capitalization of private North American companies in the Cuban sugar industry.

(b) The ('pseudo-') Republic years (1902-1958)

The year 1902 was marked by the withdrawal of the US from direct rule and the start of the first Republic years. Cuba was left to build a 'modern' state and a 'new' nation. During this effort, in no way one-dimensional or of catholic consensus, 'Africanity' in relation to 'Cuban-ness' presented the new nation with challenges, as integration, being the goal, was often seen to be achievable by assimilating the now free African slaves and their descendants into the Cuban society by partially eliminating attitudes of them deemed as 'irrational', 'primitive', 'backwards', and 'animistic' (Ayorinde 2004:51). This, however, could not be achieved by outward repression and unjustified prohibitions, as now, the Afro-Cubans were citizens in a fuller sense and not slaves. It could be achieved, though, by a slow process characterized by two persisting features, even in the Revolution years: first, by stigmatizing in the official discourse certain attitudes deemed as 'irrational' and, second, by converting them into folkloric traits doomed to be extinguished gradually through the modernization of Cuba. It was in this atmosphere that the first systematic approaches to Afro-Cuban religions, which both broke from certain past attitudes and continued to perpetuate them came to the fore.

The early research on Afro-Cuban religions drew its interests and conclusions, deeply instilled with assumptions and prejudices, from fields such as evolutionary anthropology and criminology. One of the first and still most prominent today is the work of Cuban ethnographer, Fernando Ortiz, who conducted systematic research on them. In the beginning, he subscribed to the evolutionary and criminological (inspired by Lombroso) trend of the time and 'considered the troubling legacy of slavery and the African presence—seen as a veritable heart of darkness with the island's urban capitals—in relation to the shape and destiny of the modern Cuban nation' (Brown 2003a:3). In a nutshell, Afro-Cuban religions or 'witchcraft' (*brujería*) were seen as pagan and animistic practices and beliefs, still surviving among Africans and their descendants, which on a micro-social level held them back to the margins of society and on a macro-social one held Cuba back from

its modernizing republican aspirations (see Castellanos 1916; Ortiz 1986, 1987, 2001; Roche y Monteagudo 1908; Trujillo y Monagas 1882). This kind of academic trend was born in a climate quite hostile to Afro-Cubans and their practices, which sometimes led to outward repression and prohibition, especially up until the 1920s. It was in this period that the old-style *cabildos* either vanished or had to re-shape themselves into more of civic institutions and suppress their more public expressions of ‘African-ness’.

This period opened up a new stage for the Afro-Cuban religions, which, having to go underground became much more private, undergoing structural transformations. At the same time, the former ‘ethnic’ distinctions started transforming into specific *reglas* (literally meaning ‘rules’), religious traditions attached to a broad ethnic denomination and increasingly signifying a distinct ritual field in which one could become part of by way of initiation but not necessarily by descent (see Brandon 1993:78, 83; Brown 2003a:28, 67-71). This is what has been distilled to the present into what is known as *Regla Ocha/Ifá* (or *Santería*) and *Regla Conga (Palo Monte)*, where, by way of initiation, one acquires a ‘religious family’ (*familia religiosa*), with its ‘godfather’ (*padrino*) and ‘godmother’ (*madrina*)—those who conduct the initiation—‘brothers’ (*hermanos*)—the other people initiated by the same ‘godparents’—and a complex genealogical tree with its ‘trunks’ (*troncos*) and ‘branches’ (*ramas*), which some can trace back even to the colonial era. Furthermore, as the various *reglas* developed, one can witness a gradual coexistence of multiple deities (the *orichas* in the case of *Ocha/Ifá*) under the same ‘house-temple’ and traced in one individual, whereby he or she undergoes various kinds and degrees of initiations that relate him or her to more than one entity.

Initiation in *Ocha/Ifá* is normally divided along the axis of ‘receiving’ (*recibir*) and ‘making’ (*hacer*) ‘powers’ (*poderes*) or deities (the *orichas*). While one may ‘receive’ a number of *orichas* that are seen to have a special ‘affinity’ (*afinidad*) with the person and provide him or her with specific ‘protections’ (*protecciones*), the *oricha* that is ‘made’ is always one—often called ‘tutelary *oricha*’ (*oricha tutelar*)—and is meant to be related with the person much more intimately and in a more encompassing way than the *orichas* ‘received’. The ‘tutelary *oricha*’ is said to be the ‘father’ or ‘mother’ of the person and he or she its ‘child’. Whether one may

be initiated and under whose *orichas*' protection is decided by the *Ocha/Ifá* oracles and, in case the latter indicate the need for it, the person, along with consecrated objects that are said *to be* the *orichas* and which are often the centres of offerings and sacrifices, receives oracular 'signs' (*signos* in Spanish, *oddu* in Yoruba); their mythological content is meant to condense the initiate's relation with the *orichas* in question and the more pertinent aspects of his or her destiny, or else, 'path' (*camino*) (for a detailed description of *Ocha/Ifá* initiation, see Brown 2003a:62-112).

In the case of *Palo Monte* a similar phenomenon can be observed, although, as other than the *orichas* entities are involved, the ritual steps of initiation, the oracles, and the receiving of consecrated objects and 'powers' is different in nature and content (see chapter 2; see also Bolívar Aróstegui and González Díaz de Villegas 1998; Cabrera 1986; James Figarola 2006a, 2006b; Ochoa 2010b). Furthermore, initiations in *Palo* do not involve the acquisition of the ever-important oracular 'signs' that follow the 'reception' or 'making' of the *orichas*, but, as I will describe in more detail later, 'things' and entities of a very specific nature.

Around this era (middle of 19th century), another religious current started gaining increasing popularity, initially among the 'white', middle-upper classes, and consequently diffusing into the lower ones. Schematically, thus, it followed the opposite direction to the Afro-Cuban religions, which commenced with the slaves, the lower classes and then diffused to the rest of the Cuban society. This was the Spiritist movement, imported from Europe and North America, which in Cuba acquired the name of *Espiritismo*. *Espiritismo* seems to have filled a relative gap, namely, that of the systematic and intense veneration of and communication with the spirits of the dead which neither the white, Catholic population was previously practicing—as it went against many orthodox Christian understandings and attitudes—nor the African-born and their descendants who, as it has been argued, having lost their contact with their homeland, their social structures having been obliterated, they had also lost a systematic worship of their ancestors (see Brandon 1993:85-90). As *Espiritismo* diffused and spread, mainly in the private domain rather than being openly public and institutionalized, it inevitably met with the Afro-Cuban religious traditions (see Argüelles Mederos and Hodge Limonta 1991; Brandon

1993:85-90, 134-136, 171-180; Espirito Santo 2009a:25-36; Hodge Limonta and Rodríguez 1997; Román 2007a:219-22).

Ritual kinship in *Espiritismo* is much less structured than in *Ocha/Ifá* and *Palo Monte*, and this is congruent with the fact that there are no rigid or very formal practices of initiation. Thus, people do not acquire ‘godparents’ (*padrinos* and *madrinas*) in the strict sense of the word but relate to individuals who can sense the presence of ‘the dead’ (*muertos*) and can, thus, identify the identities and biographies of the specific *muertos* who are said to be ‘attached’ (*apegados*) by way of ‘affinity’ to each individual. The identification of the *muertos*’ presence, character and degree of intimacy with the living is much more gradual, ever-transforming and idiosyncratic when compared to the entities involved in *Ocha/Ifá* or *Palo* and, therefore, the relations between those who can sense the *muertos*—called *mediums* or *espiritistas*—are also more fluid and varying (in the sense that a particular *muerto* can be seen by a variety of people, at different instances and with different messages to convey).

The advent of the 1920s can be broadly said to have been the critical point where Afro-Cuban religions were practiced mainly in houses, which have since then become the space of a more atomized kind of veneration and liturgy, which persists till the present. These are commonly known as ‘temple-houses’ (*casa-templo*) and in them, as Brown has convincingly argued (2003a:62-112), what we now know as Afro-Cuban religions have taken their current shape. After the 1920s, as this can be evinced by the *Afrourbanismo* movement (a folkloric, artistic and literary sympathetic—even exoticizing, as were ‘primitivist’ movements found elsewhere in Europe and the US—interest towards ‘things Afro’; see, for example, Carpentier 1933; Chomsky 2003:192-218), research on Afro-Cuban religions also became somewhat more sympathetic, taking them more seriously and on their own terms, although with many of the old prejudices still persisting. Researchers were now more positively inclined to them and this can be witnessed in the radical change of style and approach of Ortiz himself, who became more interested in these religions not as a pathological phenomenon in need of elimination but as a constitutive element of ‘Cuban-ness’ and in need of preservation, though in folkloric and aestheticized

terms, as a national treasure (see Cabrera 1970, 1972, 1993; Lachatañerè 1992; Ortiz 1946, 1950, 1959, 1985, 1992, 2002).

(c) The Revolution years (1959-present)

In many ways, the Revolution (1959) opened a whole new chapter, not only in the history of Cuba in general, but also in the fate of Afro-Cubans and Afro-Cuban religions. As the Revolution from a very early stage explicitly promised and moved towards a society not based on a rigid class system, it definitively embraced the lower classes and went against the deep-seated interests of the ruling ones and the old regimes. As for the former, this automatically implied better treatment of the Afro-Cubans which would mark the whole revolutionary approach both at home and its universal and international aspirations. As Ayorinde says: 'The liberation of oppressed blacks in Cuba was extended to the liberation of the oppressed elsewhere' (2004:93), often in Africa itself, and resulting in Fidel Castro exclaiming in 1975, with a definitive hint of anti-Americanism, that Cuba is not a Latin American country but a 'Latin African' one (Ayorinde 2004:94). Yet, what was before deemed as the correct path for Cuba's modernization project was not only not abandoned by the Revolution but even accentuated and considered constitutive of the now revolutionary project. In general, and as Ayorinde puts it, '[t]he government attempted to redirect loyalty from the family, the churches, and Afro-Cuban religions to the nation and the party' (2004:95). By increasingly getting closer ideologically to and becoming more dependent economically on the Soviet Union during the 1970s, 'theories of scientific atheism gained currency' (Ayorinde 2004:96). Nevertheless, the Cuban government, unlike the Soviets, never outlawed religion but tried to restrict it in more indirect ways. The move against religion, unlike the colonial and 'pseudo-republican' era, was not directed towards a particular social group or indeed religion, but was total; against religion as a whole. This move against religion and even more so against Christian religion, especially Catholicism, which was traditionally more institutionalized than the Afro-Cuban ones, was obviously directly linked to the ruling classes that the Revolution was meant to displace.

The increasing attachment of the Cuban Revolution to the Soviet Union led to a stricter attitude towards religion which, true to its Marxist-Leninist affiliations, was defined as 'the peoples' opiate'. The most well-known 'measure' against religion of

the 1970s and 1980s was the exclusion of people who were religious of any kind of faith (be that Christian, Afro-Cuban or anything else) from the 'Party' (*Partido Comunista de Cuba*) and its 'Youth Union' (*Unión de Jóvenes Comunistas*). As both institutions were the most official stamp of who was to be considered a true revolutionary and were strongly linked to most conventional professional opportunities; those stigmatized as religious and barred from the above were seriously marginalized, even to the point of not being able to find a job or being fully granted the promised rights of a citizen of the revolutionary state. As the manifestations of Afro-Cuban religions were much more extrovert, so to speak, than those of let us say the Christian ones, it was only natural that in such a hostile environment their suppression was felt more. Afro-Cuban religiosity involves a plethora of objects which serve as a means of manifestation of a multiplicity of other-than-human entities, offerings placed in the domestic, urban and physical landscape, and ceremonies that often attract large numbers of people and tend to be easily seen or heard (as chants, music and dancing are an indispensable part of them). Many of these manifestations had to be limited and as a result became more covert.

Soviet-inspired folkloric research was directed towards Afro-Cuban religions as remnants of a past that was set to disappear with the consequent revolutionary project of 'rationalization' and the education of the masses; keeping the more aesthetic parts of them and de-contextualizing them from their more inclusive attitude towards various aspects of life or focusing on their more (socio-)historical aspects.³ Towards the end of the 1980s the official take on religion began to change as indeed the whole revolutionary project underwent a re-evaluation. In the third party congress in 1986, it was decided that the Revolution should be more open and it was then that it was suggested that religiosity was not an inherent enemy of the revolutionary state and, thus, the previous marginalization and exclusion of religious individuals was probably too harsh (Ayorinde 2004:104). This led to the 1990s where things changed even more dramatically. Cuba had long been heavily dependent on the Soviet Union. With its collapse, Cuba entered its 'special period in times of peace' (*periodo especial en tiempos de paz*), which, accompanied by stricter

³ For such a phenomenon see, for example, Barnet 1983; Barreal 1966; Díaz Fabelo 1960; Guanche Pérez 1983, 1986; Guanche Pérez and León 1979; Guillén 1974; Martínez Furé 1997; Moreno 1988; León, 1964, 1984; López Valdés 1985; Sosa 1982, 1984.

North American sanctions, brought extreme economic hardships to the country. The fourth party congress (1991) was indicative of the serious situation Cuba had entered and the bold modifications on various levels that had to take place. This was the time when a huge ‘opening up’ (*apertura*) was deemed necessary and as a consequence the dollar was legalized and tourism increased dramatically. This also led to a kind of self-reflection on the possibly misguided dependence on the Soviet Union. This included views on religion:

They [the congress] blamed an uncritical acceptance of Marxist models developed in other contexts that reflected the scientific atheist thinking of the socialist bloc. Scientific atheism (like other models inherited from the Soviets) was denounced as inappropriate for the Cuban situation [...] The congress also debated whether believers should be allowed to join the party (Ayorinde 2004:147).

Fidel Castro announced that ‘we are a party, not a religion, and at a certain moment we converted the party and atheism into a religion’ (Ayorinde 2004:147). Studies on Afro-Cuban religions since (at least) the late 1980s indicated a significant increase in their members and with the wish to make the Revolution ‘speak’ to more people and increase party membership, religions in Cuba were considered with a much more open frame of mind. It was in this period that studies on Afro-Cuban religions also significantly increased both by Cubans and foreigners, who were now allowed to enter and stay in the country much more freely and for longer periods of time. Approaches on the Afro-Cuban religions became more diverse and exhibited an interest in their current conditions rather than viewing them as relics of the past; consequently a generally more processual approach started permeating them.

For instance, since the 1970s, the interest by foreign researchers increased, not being limited to the more ‘Africanist’ approaches of the past led by Herskovits and Bascom (see Bascom 1950, 1980; Bascom and Herskovits 1959; Herskovits 1937, 1966; see also Bastide 1971, 2007 for the case of Brazil). Unlike them, who, although acknowledging the deep transformations of these religions into the New World, focused more on the survivals, retentions, and resistance of the Afro-Americans, the younger generation started putting the emphasis on ‘unique syncretisms’ and ‘rapid creolization’ (Brown 2003a:27) that the Afro-Americans underwent but, more importantly, consciously and actively led. The trend, now, became not origins but dynamic transformation as this was beginning to be

envisioned by scholars of the ‘Black Atlantic’ in general (see Gilroy 1993; Mintz 1974; Mintz and Price 1981, 1992; Price 1983; Thompson 1983). In the case of Afro-Cuban religions, this might have been assisted by the fact that after the 1970s there was an increase in the migration of Cubans (and not only of those linked directly to the white upper classes, many of whom fled the country shortly after the ‘Triumph of the Revolution’ in 1959), and this led to a widespread ‘exportation’ of Afro-Cuban religions, especially in the US and Latin America (such as Mexico, Colombia, Puerto Rico and Venezuela), but also in Europe (especially Spain). The advent of the fall of the Soviet Union and the ‘special period’ accentuated this flow. Therefore, these religions could also be studied outside of Cuba.⁴

At the same time, more non-Cuban scholars were drawn to study the Afro-Cuban religions in Cuba itself, a phenomenon which ran parallel to the so-called ‘religious boom’ of the 1990s (see Ramírez Calzadilla 2006) that spurred Cuban scholars to approach them as a living and vibrant phenomenon, and particularly as responding to the social or psychological ‘needs’ of the present, but also a persistent interest in origins and how people evoke them through the liturgical collective memory.⁵ Non-Cuban scholars have sought to highlight the dynamic character of Afro-Cuban religions from various focal points, such as ethnohistory (see Brown 2003a, 2003b; Dianteill 2002; Palmié 2001, 2002, 2007; Román 2007a, 2007b), politics and national identity (see Ayorinde 2004; Hearn 2008; Miller 2000; Moore 2004; Routon 2006, 2009; Wirtz 2004, 2007), arts and performance (see Bettelheim 2001; Garoutte and Wambaugh 2007; Hagedorn 2000, 2001), medical anthropology (see Wedel 2004) and a relatively recent turn to an anthropological tackling of the cosmological and ontological aspects of them (see Espirito Santo 2009a, 2009b, 2010; Holbraad 2007a, 2007b, 2008a, 2008c; Ramón Ochoa 2007, 2010a, 2010b).

If I had to place myself within this spectrum of approaches and interests, I would opt for this last ‘recent turn’ just mentioned. This is not because I find the rest less rewarding, but because, as I said in the very opening of the introduction, my main and initial interest is the indigenous definitions of what exists; especially

⁴ See, for example, Brandon 1993:104-125; Brown 1993, 2003a:92-97, 157-160; Dianteill 2002; Lefever 1996; Murphy 1988; Palmié 1995a, 2001; Romberg 2009; Sandoval 1979.

⁵ See, for example, Barnet 2001; Fernández Martínez 2005; Fernández Martínez and Porras Potes 2003; Fuentes Guerra y Gómez 2004 ; Guanche Pérez 1996a, 1996b; Menéndez 1990, 1995a, 1995b, 2002

‘things’, that if only their ‘structural-functional’ aspects are highlighted, they would tend to be reduced to ‘definitions’ which remain ‘other’ to the indigenous ones, ultimately amounting to analysis becoming a sort of *dialysis*. In other words, it produces a narrative that is based on the assumption-cum-conclusion that they ultimately *do not exist*. Thus, the (not so) New World becomes an anthropologically interesting place exactly because its historical constitution has been moulded by the meeting of different ‘cultures’, mainly of European, indigenous (Amerindian) and African origin.⁶ In what follows, I mention two general points of inspiration for this thesis to which I return in the final chapters, but with a more specific and explicit approach to them.

‘The Europeans lacked perspectivism’

Writer and critic, Tzvetan Todorov, illustrates the conquest of America as the space of encounter between ‘Others’, the Europeans and the Indians (1992). Unavoidably, he relies heavily on written documents produced by the Spaniards and is, thus, more revealing in what the latter thought and perceived of the Indians. For instance, he traces the views of certain individuals who played an active role in the ‘discovery’ and conquest of the New World, such as Christopher Columbus (the discoverer), Hernán Cortés (the conqueror), Montezuma (the conquered), and Bartolomé de Las Casas (the missionary); and juxtaposes the two different worldviews (that is, the Spanish and the indigenous). Todorov presents interesting differences in the views among each group, especially the Spaniards, but also argues for a relative tendency of each one to perceive the other in a certain way. Despite the otherwise very interesting and important variations, the Spaniards, just as the rest of the European colonialists, exhibited an indifference, even hostility, towards acknowledging the Indians as full subjects. Because of this, real dialogue with them never existed (exemplified in Columbus’ attitude; 1992:3-50), and when some form of it was developed, the main purpose was the retrieval of information that would lead the colonizers to best exploit the natural and human resources of the New World (further exemplified in Cortés’ attitude; 1992:53-123). Todorov argues that the encounter

⁶ In the case of Cuba the presence of Amerindian indigenous groups is much less obvious due to, among others, their relative small numbers, and their vast physical and cultural extinction in the colonial era (see Gott 2005:11-23).

between Old and New World presents us with ‘the problematics of alterity’ (1992:185).

The documents reveal an internal to the colonialists debate whether the Indians were to be treated as equals or not to the Europeans (1992:146-167). Either the Indians would be different and inferior to the Spaniards (Columbus and Cortés) or they would be identical and equal (Las Casas; 1992:127-182). However, even in the latter’s case, the result would be assimilation; the Indians adopting the European way of life, and not by choice but imposition, whether violent or not. Both cases abide ‘by the principle of identity (rather than by that of difference)’ (1992:153), whereby ‘difference is corrupted into inequality, equality into identity’ (1992:146). Ultimately, what the Spaniards lacked (as well as the Indians but with radically different connotations; 1992:63-97; for a similar approach see Sahlins 1995) was, what Todorov calls, ‘perspectivism’ (1992:189, 192, 193, 251). One of the few historical figures who got close to it (although not definitively, explicitly and fully consciously) was the Dominican bishop of Chiapas, Mexico, Bartolomé de Las Casas in the famous controversy at Valladolid, Spain in 1550, arguing against the scholar Ginés de Sepúlveda, who would support the thesis that the war against the Indians was justifiable due to their inferiority and savagery (1992:151-161). Although Las Casas, according to Todorov, seems to direct his arguments towards a Christian view of egalitarianism and universalism of which its logical implications are the assimilation of the Indians to the European culture, Todorov traces hints of ‘perspectivism’—which embraces egalitarianism without the obliteration of differences, at least not by means of imposition—in a passage of Las Casas, where he comments on the Aztecs’ practices of human sacrifice and cannibalism (1992:185-201). Such practices were thought of, as Sepúlveda argued, as prime ‘proof’ of the Indians’ difference-cum-inferiority and hence justification of war (1992:186). Todorov follows the argument of Las Casas in some detail (1992:186-189), and traces its ‘perspectivist’ qualities.

Las Casas commences his response by saying that no matter how we view human sacrifice or cannibalism in terms of morality (assuring us that he also does not agree with them morally), this should not be reason for reacting violently against those who practice them. In addition, if they—human sacrifice and cannibalism—are

part of the Indian social norms, individuals could not be condemned for following and respecting their own cultural laws. Las Casas proceeds by problematizing the condemnation of sacrifice itself. He first argues that Christianity is not foreign to the notion of sacrifice, not even of human sacrifice, as God commanded both Abraham and Jephthah to sacrifice for 'Him' their son and daughter respectively (1992:188). He mentions more Christian examples of the sacrifice of human life and argues that even Spaniards, in extreme situations, resorted to eating each other. But what makes Las Casas an insipient 'perspectivist', Todorov tells us, are his arguments which were presented as four 'evidences' of the humanity of the Indians.

Firstly, they possess an 'intuitive knowledge of God' (1992:188), namely, of something absolutely superior than them. Secondly, they worship the divine in their own way and as best as possible. Thirdly, and most importantly, the Indians sacrifice to the 'god who is thought to be true' (1992:189) what they value most, the ultimate gift, human life. Thus, and fourthly, 'sacrifice exists by the force of natural law, and its forms will be established by human laws, notably in regard to the nature of the object sacrificed' (1992:189). It is here that Las Casas, in Todorov's view, is lead to 'perspectivism', initiating it by the claim that the Aztecs' god is true to them:

But to acknowledge that their god is true for them—is that not to take a first step toward another acknowledgement, i.e., that our God is true for us—and only for us? What then remains common and universal is no longer the God of the Christian religion, to whom all should accede, but the very idea of divinity, of what is above us; the religious rather than religion [...] it is really surprising to see "perspectivism" introduced into a field that so poorly lends itself to it. Religious feeling is not defined by a universal and absolute content but by its orientation, and is measured by its intensity (1992:189).

Las Casas, Todorov argues, shows an affection—'love'—for the Indians that leads him to take the Indians' religious 'feeling' seriously, something very reminiscent of the attitude of Maurice Leenhardt, a Protestant missionary in New Caledonia, Melanesia at the turn of 19th century and beginning of the 20th (see Leenhardt 1979). Although in a less self-conscious way, Las Casas' arguments lead him to exhibit:

[A] new variant of the love for one's neighbor, for the Other—a love that is no longer assimilationist but, so to speak, distributive: each has his own values; the comparison can be made only among certain relations—of each human being to *his* god—and no longer among substances: there are only formal universals [...] There is no longer a true God (ours), but a coexistence of possible universes [...] Las Casas surreptitiously abandoned theology and practices here a kind of religious anthropology which, in his context, is indeed a reversal, for it certainly seems that the man who assumes a discourse on religion takes the first step toward the abandonment of religious discourse itself (1992:190).

Therein lies Las Casas' 'radicalism', where no 'middle way' fits (1992:191). There is either a true universal religion or not, and therefore the Indians are not savages or aspects of our past, and now evolved, selves. This, for Todorov, bares the very crucial implication that assimilationism is renounced and, rather, a 'neutral path' is chosen, that of the Indians deciding what is best for them (1992:193; see also p. 249). Todorov's interesting reading of the historical documents ends with a warning. In our 'modern' times, he argues, it is easy to see the ('perspectivist') point Las Casas was surreptitiously making, but with a tendency to transform it into a 'caricature':

"Neutral" love, *Las Casas's* "distributive" justice, are parodied and drained of meaning in a generalized relativism where anything goes, so long as one chooses the right point of view; perspectivism leads to indifference and to the renunciation of all values [...] it is replaced by eclecticism and comparatism, by the capacity to love everything a little, of flaccidly sympathizing with each option without ever embracing any. Heterology, which makes the difference of voices heard, is necessary; polylogy is insipid (1992:251).

Todorov's apt comment speaks to the 'relativist' tendencies that could transform 'perspectivism' into something negative or caricature-like, but I do not think that he takes 'relativism' as an inherent quality of 'perspectivism', but as a threat to it. If anything, 'perspectivism' may work, on the contrary, as a space of preservation for distinct perspectives rather than their dissolution into one another, in which the passion for difference stands out, even with the peril of over-emphasizing it and hence seemingly adopting a conservative attitude. But I do not think that the dialogical qualities of this kind of 'perspectivism' have anything conservative about them, because what they precisely do is to unsettle our own perspectives.

Going past 'syncretism'

Another point of inspiration for my thesis is the work of the recently deceased Cuban scholar and ethnographer, Joel James Figarola (1942-2006). While the majority of his work focuses on *Palo Monte* and Cuban *Vodú* as these are practiced in the eastern parts of Cuba (see James Figarola 2006a, 2006b; James Figarola *et al.* 1998), his book *Sistemas Mágicos-Religiosos Cubanos: principios rectores* (2001) is, to my knowledge, one of the exceptionally few, if not the only, efforts to compare on an equal basis and in depth distinct traditions such as the *Regla de Ocha* (*Santería*), the *Regla Conga* (*Palo Monte*), the Cuban variant of *Vodú*, and *Espiritismo* (*de cordón*), by revealing both differences and similarities. If one is privileged enough to be able

to read in Spanish (as his publications have not been translated), one can appreciate the very distinctive character of Figarola's writing, especially when compared to other Cuban and non-Cuban scholars who deal with Afro-Cuban religious traditions. Without wishing to categorize and generalize excessively, my general feeling, after having read so many accounts on these traditions, is that they miss an analytical or interpretative depth and imagination that would boldly transgress the borders of conventional description. Figarola, in this sense, appears to be quite unique and I would place him on the other end, even to the extreme of being too 'philosophical' and with the tendency to make ethnographic description often seem extremely confined, obscure, and even somewhat irrelevant. But this is precisely his point, namely, that the 'magico-religious systems' of Cuba 'contain tangible philosophical formulations, although not theoretically systematized' (2001:10; my translation).⁷ A valuable and valid point I believe, although his often obscure and highly selective use of ethnography make him vulnerable to criticism in the face of questioning whether these 'philosophical formulations' are indeed a reflection of the systems or his own view of them.

The general approach of Figarola is to pinpoint the underlying similarities, or as the subtitle of the book suggests, the 'governing principles', beneath the apparent differences. In the very introduction of the book, he argues that there has yet not been a serious effort to account for 'the process of *mestizaje* [(something like) mixing] in Cuba' (2001:7) and informs the reader that the approach to these 'governing principles' will adopt 'an ontological perspective' (2001:8). The first, and most important, principle which governs the rest is what he calls 'the principle of multiple representation' (2001:10-50). He commences his analysis of this principle through a Frazerian-like approach by ascribing to it aspects of 'sympathetic magic', divided into 'homeopathic magic' which obeys the 'law of similarity' and 'contagious magic', which in itself obeys the 'law of contact' (see Frazer 1993:11-48), or as Figarola himself calls them, 'imitative character', 'continuation' and 'substitution' (2001:22). He offers some examples of the 'systems' under study, whereby deities are 'represented' in multiple ways (in objects, in elements of nature, in spirit possessions, and so on), humans are substituted for objects and vice versa, spirits of

⁷ Whenever I quote Figarola from now on, translations are mine.

the dead are manifested in collective groups of people, as illustrations of what he means by ‘multiple representations’. The latter, in Figarola’s hands, are not rigorous symbolic classifications but obtain a life of their own, as it were, and ‘add efficacy and power’ (2001:25): ‘the representations have the capacity of free movement, to increase or decrease and to establish relations with the rest of the exterior world, independently from the behaviour of the represented object’ (2001:24).

Figarola, as far as I understand him, tries to distance himself from a constructivist understanding of representation and treats it in a similar way to Taussig’s notion of ‘mimesis’, who in turn departs from Frazer—and then proceeds with Benjamin (see Taussig 1993; for another interesting discussion on representation, see Wagner 1978, 1986). He also makes the bold claim that ‘multiple representation’ can be evinced within each ‘system’, or tradition, playing a specific role and highlighting different aspects of it in each one, but it is also in itself a system that permeates and, thus, brings together all of the traditions (2001:47). Each tradition, thus, gives priority yet ‘with a non-exclusivist reach’ (2001:48) to specific aspects of ‘multiple representation’. For the *Regla de Ocha*, he proposes, the emphasis is put on the ability of the deities—the *orichas*—to obtain multiple forms the majority of which tend to be anthropomorphic and on the initiates’ ‘assimilation’ of the *oricha* through spirit possession and divination (2001:48-49). For *Palo Monte*, what is distinctive is the ‘inclusive and multifarious character’ and the plurality of the properties that each magic force and power possesses with which the initiate is inextricably implicated (2001:49). In *Vodú*, what prevails is the co-presence and ‘interferences’ of multiple deities—the *lua*—in a given situation such as a ritual, informing and affecting an individual (2001:49). In *Espiritismo de cordón*, the ‘governing principle’ is the possibility of many mediums channelling simultaneously the communication with a spirit of a dead person.

One might agree or not with the specific content Figarola ascribes to each ‘system’ as illustrative of the ‘principle of multiple representation’; I, for example, find his propositions underdeveloped and with not as much ‘thick’ ethnographic description as I would have wished for. But I still find his attempt an original call for dealing with the various traditions, engaging with the fact that many peoples’ lives are informed and affected by more than one of them. And whether the words

‘principle’ and ‘representation’ may sound dubious for some, it is the ‘multiple’ that I believe forms the key point of Figarola’s reading. Furthermore, his attempt has the merit of transgressing the most formal limits that can be said to distinguish among practices and beliefs recognized to belong in each ‘system’. By arguing that all traditions are governed by the same ‘principle of multiple representation’, although with a different content (and function), implies that there exists an encompassing ‘ontological perspective’ that is specific to the Cuban case and not just to each tradition (see 2001:184-196). This leaves him with the relative freedom to engage with them—the traditions—in innovative ways that could throw new light on their interrelations. My thesis is very much akin to this kind of approach. Instead of commencing with the assumption that there are clearly delineated boundaries between the various traditions, the coexistence of which would view them as becoming ‘syncretic’ *post facto* and in their historical development, I propose a slightly different path. I begin with what Figarola does, but not in a very explicit way, namely, with what kind of interactions between humans and other-than-human entities are instantiated in each case.

Towards the end of the book (2001:165-183), Figarola proposes a distinction within the very broad category of other-than-human entities between deities and the dead. Without exploring the issue in depth, he argues that:

[T]he differentiating specificities of each system of beliefs [...] reside in the relations that are being established between the divinities and the dead, in virtue of the specific weight that is attributed to them in each case (2001:181).

It is this statement that I take as one of the core elements of this present thesis and try to deal with, both ethnographically and theoretically and with as much depth as possible; deities, the dead and, of course, the living humans. A triangle that in every step of my fieldwork was more than often implicit, and always present and impossible to avoid. Figarola, in this same chapter mentions the importance of divination (2001:172-178). He proposes a more rigorous engagement with it, lamenting the fact that it is specifically this arena in which the accounts on Afro-Cuban religious traditions have remained poor on a descriptive and analytical level. His brief analysis merely offers us a useful point of departure, yet the fact that he mentions divination in his chapter that argues for this (re)conceptualization of the

relations between the deities and the dead is, for me, quite telling. It is divination that became the main ‘instance’ of my fieldwork, as, through it, the various other-than-human entities were perceived to ‘speak’. What they said mainly revolved around utterances of what their view was on human affairs, most often directed towards specific individuals (to whom their messages were concerned), but also messages that alluded to their own state of being, their moods and dispositions; their perspectives in general. Thus, divination seemed to do two things at least; first, provide us with perspectives on the biographies of those humans to whom divination was referring and, second, perspectives about the biographies of the entities. Furthermore, these two things were inseparably linked. But, divination is not just a piece of information upon which to just reflect. The oracular messages were not ‘floating signifiers’ (*a la* Levi-Strauss), but stemmed from and led to specific actions (see also Holbraad 2008a, 2008c); since they were meant to refer to one’s life-course or ‘path’ (*camino*), and it is this very ‘path’ that was harnessed through them.

My position as a foreigner and anthropologist was not always met without ambiguities. Especially for the former, Cubans, due to the prolonged economic crisis and the recent ‘opening’ to foreigners, often relate with them in a quite specific context. In general, the most prominent ‘kind’ of foreigners who visit Cuba are tourists, namely, people who stay for a relatively short period of time. Foreigners-as-tourists are a source of invaluable hard currency, not only through state-owned companies, such as hotels or medical facilities, but also through a vast network of more informal economies, often going beyond the limits of the legally permitted. All sorts of ‘services’ can be provided to tourists without the latter directly dealing with the state: from accommodation, transport, food and the purchase of distinctively Cuban products, such as cigars and rum, to even, and as Cuba is widely known for, sex. The latter is an extremely complex phenomenon, worthy of a whole dissertation, as it is not confined to the conventional image one might have of it.

Here we are not just dealing with a limited and professionalized sector of society which delivers one kind of service—sex—and expects from the ‘client’ an immediate and relatively pre-established material return. ‘Sex with a price’ is only a part of a much broader phenomenon of the relationships developed between locals and foreigners which can accommodate other desires of both sides, the complexity of

which distance us from the purposes of this thesis (for an interesting discussion, see Palmié 2002:260-289). Broadly speaking, though, there seems to be a tension between locals and foreigners which can be perceived by the latter—as this was my position—as a rather constant state of suspicion, or at least doubt, about the intentions of the former. In other words, a foreigner is very likely to experience a sense that the locals want something from him or her other than the probably too romantic expectations he or she might have of ‘pure’ friendship, love and even sex.

I had to negotiate these ambiguities constantly, although, as I did stay for a rather long period, I believe I managed to go beyond the (stereo)typical ‘foreigner-as-tourist’—*yuma*—position.⁸ These ambiguities also affected my fieldwork, especially in the beginning, as I attempted to create bonds that were not purely based on the transactions that normally characterize the relationships between locals and foreigners. Maybe this is one of the reasons why I was not keen on being initiated in the Afro-Cuban religions myself as this also creates an environment of transactions, often of a very material nature. It also creates strong relations, in many respects an obligation, with the ‘ritual family’ that conducted the initiation, which may have the possible consequence of being limited from a more open interaction with other ‘ritual families’.

Many foreigners visit Cuba with an explicit interest in Afro-Cuban religions. Apart from academics, I have met and heard of numerous cases of foreigners visiting the island in order to be part of initiations and consultations. As with any other ‘service’ or ‘product’ provided, foreigners may pay a very different price from locals. The Afro-Cuban religions offer a vast number of rituals, initiations and oracles that, in one way or another, promise the solving of a problem, bypassing obstacles, fulfilling desires or providing a new perspective on things, which more often than not come at a price. From a more personal point of view, as the variety of traditions and their rituals refer to an extremely elaborate and individualized approach (something which I describe in the whole of this thesis), people who are in close contact with them often cannot resist engaging with them through a ritual,

⁸ In Cuban slang the word *yuma* can mean, often in a derogatory way, ‘North American’, ‘tourist’ or ‘foreigner’; it is often used to signify a person who is ignorant of the particularities of Cuban everyday life and, instead, has a rather naive and exoticized image of it.

initiation and consultation. This may contribute to the ‘dual’ nature of these traditions.

On the one hand, they are extremely open to outsiders, be they locals or foreigners, in their most public facets. One does not have to be (considered as) a ‘believer’ to be part of many ceremonies, which often involve quite an attractive and sensational ‘space’ of music, chanting, dancing and oracular pronouncements in the midst of even less ‘religious’ activities such as eating, drinking, chatting, joking and, even, flirting. On the other hand, this public face becomes much more secluded and secret in those instances where a bigger degree of commitment is observed. Divination, for instance, has its more private moments of a one-to-one interaction between the diviner and the ‘client’. Furthermore, certain parts of initiations—always followed by divination—may only be witnessed by the neophyte, those who conduct them and people who have undergone themselves the same kind of initiation. These ‘secret’ moments are numerous and to be able to witness them is seen as a privilege. Being considered as a privilege after all, the non-initiated, although not absolutely excluded and maybe exactly because of this, might sense that they are missing out the most essential parts of the ceremonies. This is probably why, and apart from more personal reasons, the large majority of researchers, both Cubans and foreigners, have undergone a kind of initiation.

I tried to be as open as possible and as my research questions included the role of divination in general I followed a path that was not confined to a specific tradition and which sought information from both the diviners and their ‘clients’. I progressively established strong bonds with particular individuals and their ‘ritual families’, whom I would visit on a regular basis (many of them appear in this thesis). Through them I would exchange long discussions on the role of the oracles in general and in their own lives, as well as have the chance to witness consultations with their ‘clients’. I also talked about divination with a lot of people who were not as active as the diviners themselves but they either had a direct experience as ‘clients’ or more indirectly knew other people who did, or those who had just an opinion on *la religión*. In general, I found access relatively easy and many people were eager to assist me. In what follows, I provide a broad outline of the thesis and a condensed description of each chapter.

Outline of the thesis

As I said in the beginning, the main ethnographic focus of the thesis is the various kinds of ‘other-than-human’ entities that appear in instances of divination. During the latter the perspectives of the former are revealed in relation to the ‘humans’ but also to themselves. Both ‘humans’ and ‘other-than-humans’ are said to have a ‘path’ (*camino*). Divination brings these ‘paths’ to the fore and shows them, but it also instantiates their mutual constitution and tight interrelations—their ‘crossed’ nature. It is here where I will attempt to show the particularities and ontological differences of these various kinds of other-than-human entities, and the traditions that invoke them, and provide a comparison on an equal basis that shows both their differences and their perception as all pertaining to the ‘beyond’.

Chapter 1 could be seen as a continuation of this Introduction. It makes a brief mention of the ethnography, but mainly makes reference to two related broad themes that appeared in multiple ways during my fieldwork. These are divination itself and notions of destiny. I consequently deal with anthropological accounts on divination and how these could throw light on the more obscure and less explored notion of destiny. Here, following Victor Turner and Robin Horton, I attempt to paint a picture of destiny in its various dimensions—ranging from specific and more ‘embodied’ points of view of it to a more encompassing and ‘disembodied’ one—which is more relevant to the indigenous notion of *camino*.

Chapters 2, 3 and 4 tackle the various kinds of other-than-human entities and more specifically the channels of communication that are instantiated between them and the living through divination through ethnographic description. More specifically, chapters 2 and 3, deal with different kinds of spirits of the dead—*los muertos*—, while chapter 4 with the deities of the *Regla de Ocha/Ifá*—the *orichas*. Chapter 2 focuses on a very little explored category of the dead (exactly because, as I argue, they seem to not ‘belong’ to any specific tradition), which I call ‘alien’ *muertos*, whose interaction with the living is often puzzling, seen as causing confusion or even misfortune. Looking at how people come to perceive them, I try to explore their condition as one of lacking the potential to communicate and relate, to get ‘attached’ to people in a way that would grant them a more stable kind of reciprocity with them. On the contrary, chapter 3 deals with those *muertos* who do

get ‘attached’ to people in a more permanent and reciprocal fashion and become, what I call, their ‘affines’ through *Espiritismo*. Between these two categories of *muertos*, I identify one which exhibits characteristics of both, but also its own *sui generis* ones. These are *muertos* who are initially drawn from the generic reservoir of ‘alien’ *muertos* but the relations instantiated with them also make them some sort of ‘affines’—although not in the conventional ‘spiritist’ sense. These are the *nfumbi* of *Palo Monte*, which I deal with in the last half of chapter 2.

Chapter 4 is dedicated to the *orichas* and their interaction with the living. The most common paths of communication with them is not the body and the senses, as is the case with the *muertos*, but mainly through ‘material’ oracles which are normally employed in the specific space and time of divination which invokes them by the adequately prepared and consecrated individuals, the diviners. Another broad distinction is that the *orichas*’ oracular utterances tend to be less idiosyncratic and context specific than those of the *muertos*, yet, if this can be seen as their limit, it is also understood as their ability to reveal a broader image of one’s *camino*. Thus, Chapters 5 and 6 try to account for all these differences and common threads in a more theoretical way.

Chapter 5 is concerned with what can be said to constitute each entity’s ontology. Considering that it is in divination that information about and from the entities is being revealed, there seems to be an interconnected notion of ‘motion’ (see Holbraad 2008c); first, in that of one’s *camino* and, second, in that of the entities themselves in order to participate in divination and, more generally, in peoples’ lives. Are there categories that could be useful in understanding both the differences and similarities among them? Is there a basic ontological ‘material’ or ‘ingredient’ that relates the living, the dead and the deities? Are we dealing with a linear movement from immanence to transcendence (and vice versa)? Are immanence and transcendence useful analytical concepts, or is something else at play? In order to start answering these questions, I engage with accounts on Afro-Cuban religious traditions that have provided me with useful ideas. I commence with Palmié, and then proceed with Holbraad and Espirito Santo, particularly in their use of the categories of ‘immanence and transcendence’ and explore whether they can account for the totality of the entities I am dealing with.

Chapter 6 proposes to compare divination with ‘perspectivism’ and explore their potential congruence or affinity. Although the most general premises of perspectivism are mentioned in the Introduction through my engagement with Todorov, here I deal with a more specific and anthropologically relevant view on it, through Viveiros de Castro. I attempt to detach perspectivism from its Amerindian context and explore whether divination in Cuba has any perspectival qualities. Final and definite conclusions are not to be expected, as I think that the venture is little explored. Thus, as with divination itself, rather than assertions or certainties, this chapter tries to show potentialities and affinities.

CHAPTER 1

DIVINATION AND DESTINY

The Others

After just a few weeks of being in Havana, my landlady willingly offers to introduce me to a neighbour of hers that, as she tells me, ‘is involved in the religion [*esta metido en la religión*].’ This quite informal way of obtaining useful contacts for my research proved to be one of the most common avenues, and this persisted till the end of my fieldwork. The ‘religion’ was not something that could be directly or strictly found in public ritual spaces and organized in a rigorous institutional way, but rather occurred in houses, out in the street, on the banks of a river or the sea, outside churches, in the middle of a forest, or a cemetery. My landlady had previously called her neighbour, ‘a well respected individual, who has helped a lot of people’, and had told him about me and my interests. As I overhear their telephone conversation, my landlady tells him: ‘My tenant is a foreign student who is interested in the religion.’ She hangs up and tells me that her neighbour, Fernando, would be glad to ‘talk about religion.’ Her constant use of the singular—‘the religion’—perplexed me on what kind of religion we were talking about. My bibliographical research when preparing for fieldwork had given me an image of the existence of multiple traditions, so, what was it, one of them or all of them? I soon came to realize that it was both.

Fernando lives on the ground floor of a three-storied block of flats with its independent entrance through a small front yard. Upon knocking on the door of his apartment, a woman in her early forties, his wife, opens and warmly welcomes me in: ‘Fernando is dressing up; he will be here in a minute, have a seat. Do you want coffee?’ I reply positively and take a seat on a very uncomfortable armchair in the small, box-shaped living-room. On the sofa are seated three young children who greet me somewhat indifferently and continue watching the TV. Fernando’s wife, Lucia, serves me the typical strong, black and sweet Cuban coffee and sits on a stool. Exchanging a few conventional words about my country of origin and my stay in Cuba, I soon realize that Lucia is as much absorbed in what is on the TV as her

children. They are watching a video cassette of a movie I recognize, ‘The Others’ (directed by Alejandro Amenábar and released in 2001); set in a huge isolated mansion and depicting a nightmarish realization of the protagonists—a mother (Nicole Kidman) with her two young children—of being dead, although not aware of it and acting as if they were alive until the end of the story. Lucia interrupted the silence: ‘This is why we, the living, play such an important part in making the dead realize their condition; you cannot imagine how many times I have experienced similar situations. If you don’t grant them acknowledgment they wander in despair and provoke mischief.’ Her words came out so naturally, with no intention to provoke some kind of a deep existential discussion about life and death and not explicitly directed to any one of us in the room. They floated in the room as a factual and mundane comment would do, not depending on or awaiting any response. Nevertheless, one of her children turned to her and asked: ‘Is this why grandma was upsetting us so much after her death?’ The child’s tone seemed again to be demonstrating that the question was more like an affirmation rather than seeking an answer. Lucia laconically replied: ‘Yes’, and kept on watching how ‘The Others’ were slowly realizing their ‘otherness’.

I was extremely intrigued and content to realize that fieldwork had already begun even in the mere act of drinking a coffee and watching a movie. I started wondering how Cubans like Lucia and her family view movies, especially those that Hollywood has produced in the hundreds, if not thousands, on fictive and paranormal stories of ghosts, spirits of the dead, extraordinary perceptual powers, and so on. What was being watched was clearly a familiar event that could be compared to the biographical experiences of this family; of specific spirits of the dead seeking ‘recognition’; of a grandmother who upset them after her death. The ‘Others’ were not a totally foreign cultural construct to be watched in an enchanting fictitiousness, but more like a sort of documentary that aroused personal memories, verified present experiences and implied future events. Was all this part of *la religión* as well? Fernando, taking him a bit more than ‘a minute’ to dress up, made his appearance in the living-room. In a loud and joking manner he said: ‘How many times will you watch this movie? Come Anastasio, let’s go inside to my consulting room.’ Fernando is around 50 years old and as he introduces himself he quickly makes known that he

is a *babalawo*, a high-priest of the Yoruba-inspired religious tradition of *Ifá*, organized around the worship of the deity—*oricha*—of divination, *Orula*.

The ‘consulting room’ (*cuarto de consulta*) which is also the couple’s bedroom, consists of a multiplicity of objects that, as I come to know, belong to *la religión*, some of which are indispensable for making *Orula* ‘come down’ (*bajarse*) and participate in Fernando’s divinations. Among others, there is a round wooden tray, carved on its borders, a chain with eight pieces of coconut attached to it, a horn, and a small wooden pot. All of these are placed around a straw mat, where Fernando sits barefoot; his usual place for consulting the *Ifá* oracle. After a long conversation revolving around my interests and a first introduction to *Ifá* divination, he asks me if I would like to stay and witness a consultation planned to take place shortly. I happily accept the invitation. The client is a man in his late thirties who has been initiated by Fernando and wishes to explore the possibility of undergoing further initiations. In traditions like *Ifá* there is normally a chain of initiations that commence with minor ones which are meant to provide a general guidance and protection, culminating—if the oracles advise so—to fuller initiations, which confer a right of active participation, the use of oracles and initiating others (see Holbraad 2008c:223-230). Fernando’s ‘godchild’ (*ahijado*) has come for a simple consultation, whereby no definitive oracular advice is given, but instead is regarded as limited in reach and only indicative.

Without providing a detailed account of the consultation here (for one, see chapter 4), it focused on the client’s current situation in a variety of aspects. The discussion ranged from the mundane and easily recognized to my untrained ears of events, such as whether things were ‘walking’ (*caminar*) smoothly in his personal and professional life, to more obscure references to his relations with his past initiations, certain *orichas* and obligations towards them. What Fernando stressed more than once was the importance of taking heed of the oracular pronouncements uttered in the young man’s previous initiation. All this discussion was ignited by the previous consultation of the *Ifá* oracle, which mainly included preliminary invocations to the spirit world, and especially *Orula*; the use of the divining chain (*okpele* or *ekuele*), which ‘drew out’ (*sacar*) the oracular ‘signs’ (*signos* or *oddu*), and upon which the subsequent conversation heavily relied on. Fernando’s comments

introduced me to a word that often made its appearance in the divinatory context, not only of consultations *per se*, but the actions following them as well. This was the word ‘path’ (*camino*). For instance, Fernando advised his *ahijado* that his *camino* was one of getting initiated in *Ocha*, and more specifically under the guidance of the *oricha Obatalá*, but not in *Ifá*. He made it clear that he should strictly stick to this advice because, otherwise, he would suffer serious misfortunes. His *camino* was to respect *la religión*, but not to be immersed in it; in other words, his initiation in *Ocha* did not foresee an active role in the priesthood. Rather, his *camino* was to become a good lawyer and *Obatalá*, an *oricha* being partly associated with justice, would come to his support if properly taken care of. Full initiation, thus, would ‘open and assure the path’ (*abrir y asegurar el camino*) towards this direction. In this context, divination seemed to play a crucial role in revealing peoples’ *caminos*, opening them up and showing them their potentials. *Camino* was sometimes interchanged by the word *destino* (‘destiny’), and thus implied a strong connection to divination. It is this very connection that provided the ethnographic foundation upon which this very diverse and often confusing image of Afro-Cuban divinatory experience, perception and conception constantly confronted me throughout my fieldwork.

The notion of *camino* was presented to me with two broad and mutually constitutive dimensions. The first referred to the ‘path’ that each living human-being was traversing in his or her life-course. Aspects of one’s *camino* may remain hidden, unexpressed and, even, unfulfilled: these ranged from specific events to more general characteristics, dispositions, tendencies, weaknesses and potentials and could be with either negative or positive effects. The second referred to the ‘path’ that other-than-human entities also traversed: spirits of the dead had one; often called *camino de muerto*, and this could range from a ‘material’ (*material*) to a ‘spiritual’ (*espiritual*) one. Deities like the *orichas* were also said to have, or to be *caminos*. In this sense, not only could distinctions be made between them, but it also revealed the many ‘paths’ a single deity could have. To say that these two dimensions—the human and the non-human—are mutually constitutive means that a deviation from or a fulfilment of a human *camino* was dependent on a ‘desire’ (*deseo*) stemming from the non-human dimension. For instance, a spirit of the dead might cause misfortunes because it requires ‘acknowledgement’ and the need to be attended to. An *oricha*

might ask for a certain sacrifice in order to be ‘fed’ and in turn to help its human ‘child’.

Divination created the ‘space’ *par excellence*, where the mutual constitution of human and other-than-human *caminos* was brought to the fore. Firstly, it revealed whether the issue and the person in question were directly related to ‘the beyond’. Secondly, if this was the case, a discernment of ‘the beyond’ was sought, that is, identification of the specific other-than-human entities involved and their desires, such as offerings or initiations. From the human point of view, divination revealed aspects of or the whole of the *camino* of an individual, as well as, and always in relation to aspects of the *camino* of specific other-than-human entities.

Broadly speaking, and as I mentioned in the Introduction, and what will be explored further in the following chapters, two kinds of other-than-human entities emerged; spirits of the dead—*muertos*—and deities—the *orichas*. Each kind of entity exhibited certain distinctive characteristics: *muertos* appeared in the senses, surrounding and interacting with one’s body. They also tended to reveal specific aspects of one’s *camino* and not so much the whole span of it. Additionally, *muertos’ caminos* seemed themselves to be a more fluid and potentially transforming state of being, always in need of the living to facilitate their motion, along with the formers’ support of the latter. The *orichas*, on the other hand, tended towards a communication with the world of the living through ‘objects’—often consecrated and acquiring the role of oracles—which revealed a mythical state of affairs—their biographies—and, by way of discernment, related it to the individual the divination was aimed at. The *orichas* were praised for being able to reveal more enduring aspects of one’s *camino* and, in the case of major initiations (where the neophyte creates a conscious and permanent relation of reciprocity with specific *orichas*), significant aspects of the whole *camino*. The fluidity of the *orichas* was not so much referring to their ontological state—this being more or less safeguarded in the mythological past—but, to rendering them, through divination, communicable and relevant to peoples’ *caminos*.

Divination and Destiny

The categories this thesis is dealing with have proved to be theoretically slippery and quite vague. Divination and destiny have not made it to the anthropological hall of fame, although, especially the first, often makes its appearance alongside other very much explored categories, such as those of 'religion', 'magic', 'ritual' and 'mythology'. Although, initially I considered this gap in anthropological inquiry to be potentially promising, in so far as it could possibly make an interesting contribution to my thesis, by providing reasoned discussion for building a systematic argument for an 'anthropology of divination and destiny', I have progressively moved away from such an enthusiastic and ambitious endeavour. This is not because I believe it to be an impossible task, or of no importance, but because an increasingly growing gut feeling makes me suspicious of any kind of an 'Anthropology of ...', especially in the face of a postmodernist deconstructive approach towards any kind of category. Such approaches have been powerful in capturing our historical imagination of self-building and understanding and by injecting a critical and self-reflexive attitude towards our theoretical models and, indeed, categories (for religion, see Asad 1993; for ritual, see Bell 1992; Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994). Yet, I also believe that they leave us with a sense of void and uncertainty of what to do next.⁹ Would it be too far-fetched or even aggressive to argue that this otherwise illuminating genealogical hunt for our 'Western' categories has entrapped us into a radically introvert and at times narcissist dead-end? (For interesting discussions, see Mimica 2010; Spencer 1989) Would I be wrong to wonder whether the appearance of even separate chapters in current Ph.D. theses which are dedicated to 'methodology', 'self-reflexivity' and 'ethics' as an almost unspoken and taken for granted rule of thumb is congruent with this aforementioned introversion? Is Anthropology merely the 'bastard child' of our colonial sins for which we should endlessly recycle our confessions to the disembodied ears of a Father God we have already killed by turning Him into a metaphor, an illusion (see Freud 1972, 1991) or, recently (again!), a delusion (see Dawkins 2007)?

⁹ I take 'us' to refer to at least graduate and post-graduate students of Anthropology who have just embarked on their academic journey and, as I have often experienced it, commence with enthusiasm which progressively shifts into disenchantment.

Returning to this short introduction to divination and destiny, I am willing to follow a strategy of dealing with them which minimises their objectification as much as possible. Avoiding to 'name' the object of study is not necessarily a negative attitude; it might offer an openness and more positive theorization, considering the taken for granted input of ethnography into the current anthropological discourse. Thus, what I mostly avoid is a kind of pre-emptive definition of them. In this chapter I will mention, somewhat selectively, certain approaches to and ethnographies of divination, position myself towards them, and introduce a broad ethnographic sketch of the Afro-Cuban divinatory phenomenon in relation to how this is linked to a particular notion of destiny. Divination and oracles have been a recurrent theme of ethnographic accounts in sub-Saharan Africa, especially by a number of British anthropologists who, as Horton suggests (1962:215), might be grouped under the label of the 'Oxford School'. This body of work unavoidably commences with the pioneering research of Evans-Pritchard.

Evans-Pritchard (1990) describes how the 'poison oracle' (*benge*) is employed by the Azande—spread among the Republic of Sudan, Zaire and the Republic of Central Africa—in order to reveal cases of 'witchcraft' (*mangu*). He distinguishes it from magic in that it is not the outcome of a rite, a spell or a manipulation of medicines, but an 'inherent quality', a 'substance in the body' which may also be inherited (Evans-Pritchard 1990:1; see also pp. 176-204). Magic—divided between 'sorcery' when the ends are anti-social and causes misfortunes and 'good magic'—involves techniques which are consciously and actively employed in order to reach the desired result; whereas witchcraft, which as sorcery creates and explains anti-social behaviour, is a 'physical act' (1990:1), stirred by the inner, often unconscious, desires of the individual and its possession of the concrete substance of witchcraft. Although the Azande make use of a multiplicity of oracles, they place the ultimate authority to the verdicts of the 'poison oracle' or *benge* (1990:40-44, 120-175). The poison is extracted from a wild forest creeper, but it is only after an adequate process of consecration that its natural properties are extended to its function as an oracle (1990:146-149). The use of *benge* is relatively simple and yields answers in the affirmative or the negative. The poison is inserted in the mouth of fowls and, depending on whether they survive or die, the Azande

acquire the answer, involving whether the misfortune in question is a matter of witchcraft and, if it is, who the witch might be.

Evans-Pritchard's most often cited example is that of the granary, which I believe encapsulates his approach on Zande oracular revelation of witchcraft (1990:22-23). Every now and then, he says, an old granary might collapse and cause injury or death to the person standing underneath. The Azande, as 'we' do, know that the granary might have been very old or eaten by termites and that this was the immediate and 'natural' cause of its collapse. Nevertheless, gravity, decay and termites do not answer with satisfaction why the granary fell at that particular moment on that particular person. In other words, 'natural' or empirical causation cannot fully and logically account for the 'coincidence in time and space':

We have no explanation of why the two chains of causation intersected at a certain time and in a certain place, for there is no interdependence between them. Zande philosophy can supply the missing link [...] Witchcraft explains the coincidence [...] Witchcraft explains *why* events are harmful to man and not *how* they happen. A Zande perceives how they happen just as we do [...] witchcraft is the socially relevant cause, since it is the only one which allows intervention and determines social behaviour [...] death is not only a natural fact but also a social fact' (1990:23-35).

Evans-Pritchard's contribution is mostly ethnographic and one can admire the detailed descriptions that stem from his commitment to take the Azande seriously, something which at the time of the book's publication (1937) was not a straightforward thing to do. Although he proclaimed that '[w]itches, as the Azande conceive them, clearly cannot exist' (1990:18), he resisted the then dominant anthropological accounts that commenced and ended with a similar frame of mind and reduced their analysis of magico-religious beliefs and practices to sociological and psychological categories already at hand. Evans-Pritchard's analysis did not remain immune to them however, as he also took witchcraft and oracles to ultimately reflect social (and antisocial) relations and 'a system of moral values which regulate human conduct' (1990:18); and to be the idiom of 'antisocial sentiments' (1990:51). Perhaps what made the difference in his work as compared to others is that he insisted on a detailed ethnographic description and kept analytical comments to a minimum.

Oracles in Cuba were also very often used to reveal ultimate causes, and people commonly consulted them in times of crisis, misfortune and puzzlement in

order to identify its origin and determine a subsequent course of action. One big ethnographic difference between this and the Azande is that misfortune did not necessarily stem from human agency (as in the case of the Azande) whether consciously or actively provoked ('sorcery', in Evans-Pritchard's terms) or not ('witchcraft'). The afflicted was faced with a wide range of causes, often stemming from his or her relation with 'the beyond'. Furthermore, 'the beyond' also proved equally difficult to define and polysemic; in it resided entities such as Yoruba deities, Catholic saints, God, 'dark' or 'enlightened' spirits of the dead, among others. Even in the case of 'witchcraft' (*brujería*), where the affliction would ultimately come from another living person, the means or origins could also be non-human. With its most popular face, witchcraft would involve the manipulation of an other-than-human entity, most often a particular kind of dead person (see chapter 2), who would be 'sent' on behalf of the afflicter to the afflicted. The multiplicity of other-than-human entities went hand in hand with a multiplicity of oracles that granted communication with them. Initiations, offerings, sacrifices and more subtle ways of participation seemed to be part of this multiplicity of 'the beyond', each meant to realign the relations to a 'path' that was potentially able to embrace each one of them. Oracles and divination participated in a very complex process of discernment among these various entities and revealed the adequate avenues of relating with them. I was thus faced with an overwhelming image of 'the beyond'.

Aspects of the Zande ethnography remind me of the Afro-Cuban one, but only as fragments of a much more encompassing phenomenon. I am also reminded of the Nuer spiritual universe as was also depicted by Evans-Pritchard (1977), where the human factor is subordinated to the more ritualized environment of deities and spirits (see also Lienhardt 1987). In order to grasp such a multiplicity and participation I found it hard to follow a somewhat more conventional path of fieldwork that can be evinced in accounts on Afro-Cuban religious traditions, namely, of focusing on just one of them. If for many Cubans 'the beyond' included all these different kinds of entities, why should the organizational structure be what has historically been distilled into different traditions? Why, in other words, commence with them axiomatically? Instead, could this 'blending'—often termed as 'syncretism' (see Ayorinde 2004:21-24; Bascom and Herskovits 1959; Bastide

2007:260-284; Brandon 1993:59-74, 157-185; Menéndez 2002)—be most fruitfully approached by making the divinatory experience the ‘object’ of study and allowing it to meander down many paths in the same way that many Cubans were confronted with? I hope this has had its merits and, to a certain extent, contributes to a consideration of this thesis as an alternative proposition of ethnographic engagement with Afro-Cuban religiosity and divination.

Some 20 or so years after Evans-Pritchard’s publication on the Zande notions of witchcraft, magic and the use of oracles, Victor Turner offered his account on Ndembu—a tribe situated in North-West Zambia—divination (1975; see also Turner 1961). Without exposing in detail Turner’s ethnography, I shall mention a distinction he makes between ‘divination’ and ‘revelation’ that might provide interesting food for thought. To begin with, Turner formulates the notion of divination and revelation as processes of ‘making visible’—*kusolola*, in the Ndembu idiom—things not straightforwardly available, something that most accounts on divination take as an indispensable and definitional premise of it.¹⁰ But, if both divination and revelation ‘unmask’, they unmask different things.

Turner builds up a dichotomy, based on his earlier work on ‘liminality’ and ‘communitas’, ‘structure’ and ‘anti-structure’ (see Turner 1995), between two aspects of social life. The first is what he calls the ‘unitary flow of experience’ (1975:16) where life, both social and natural, is experienced in its unity, without distinctions and hierarchical statuses, and with profound ‘universal’ equality and homogeneity. He calls it a ‘concrete whole’, where non-dualism prevails. The second seems to be stemming from the first and is created by the division of this unitary flow into structures, statuses and hierarchies which come to form an ‘abstract system [...] set aside from this flow’ (1975:16). This is the social plane of dualism and structures which ultimately ‘mask’ the previous homogeneous and egalitarian plane. Between the concrete whole and the abstract system there is a tension as the social person is divided between its actual structural position, with its particular interests, and a less explicit but also deeply ingrained intuitive ‘need’ for equality. The abstract system of structures, which are mutually interdependent in order to sustain it,

¹⁰ See, for example, Curry 2010; Curry and Voss 2007:viii; Johnston and Struck 2005; LaGamma 2000:7-21; Peek 1991; Peek and Winkelman 2004; Pemberton III 2000; Tedlock 2001:189; Zeitlyn 1995:189.

resemble what Dumont had in mind (1970), but also the fact that it is characterized by social divisions, hierarchies, structures and inequalities which are hidden behind an apparent whole and unity, we are also reminded of Marx's notion of ideology here (see Marx 1938).

For Turner, 'revelation' momentarily and ritually—'liminally', borrowing from Van Gennep (1960)—unmasks the unitary flow, by making it felt in an almost Durkheimian sense of 'collective effervescence' (Durkheim 2008:154-168, 280-285). 'Divination' unmasks the divisions of the abstract system. Both 'make visible':

Whether as the disclosure of what has previously been concealed (divination), or as the manifestation of what resists conceptualization in the linguistic terms available to the Ndembu (revelation) [...] Thus divination is a mode of analysis and a taxonomic system, while revelation is a prehension of experience taken as a whole [...] Divination proceeds by a sequence of binary oppositions, moving stepwise from classes to elements. Revelation, on the contrary, begins with authoritative images or root metaphors, manifested as sets of connected symbols, and is culturally contrived to give those exposed to it of what Walt Whitman might have called "the rondure, the cohesion of all" [...] Divination is the process of unmaking the private drives of those who seek personal gain at the expense of corporate welfare. Revelation and divination both unmask, but divination unmasks the culturally defined sins and vices of those who voluntarily separate themselves from the living flow of society, while revelation uncovers that flow itself (1975:15-17).

After these preliminary comments, Turner presents us with an ethnographic case of revelation (1975:37-203) and one of divination (1975:207-338) among the Ndembu. The first describes the *Chihamba* ritual, a 'cult of affliction' (37), whereby misfortune stems from ancestor spirits and a deity called *Kavula*. In order to overcome the affliction the person undergoes various degrees of initiation to the 'cult' whereby he or she gains a sense of 'wholeness' by transcending a series of structural contradictions made up in Ndembu society (1975:179-187):

This series of paradoxical situations is the nearest Ndembu can get to the expression of a total act-of-being which transcend both life and death in the material sense [...] The aim appears to be, both for poet and for Ndembu ritual man, to break through the habitual patterns formed by secular custom, rational thinking, and common sense, to a condition where the pure act-of-being is directly apprehended [...] It is believed at the therapeutic level at least that the candidates have been made whole (1975:183-185).

The second account is of Ndembu divination, whereby diviners employ an oracle that consists of a winnowing basket and certain objects that are tossed into it and given oracular configurations which the diviner then interprets in order to detect the sources of misfortune. Here the agents of misfortune are not so much spiritual beings such as ancestors or deities but humans who have acted out of selfish interest against

the moral values of Ndembu society; something which in the idiom of divination and Ndembu beliefs, according to Turner, is understood as witchcraft. The diviner essentially unmasks these social breaches. In relation to Evans-Pritchard's work, revelation would thus approximate the Nuer spiritual universe while divination the Zande witchcraft. Thinking beyond the possible criticisms of attributing divination a symbolic and regulatory nature (see Ahern 1982; Jules-Rosette 1978; Myhre 2006:314-316; Swancutt 2006; Tedlock 2001), I wish to hold onto the distinction Turner makes between 'revelation' and 'divination', and explore whether it can be of any relevance to the Cuban context.

To begin with, I wish to distance myself from the specific content Turner ascribes to both terms. Thus, in order to render his views constructive of my own, I shall initially and partially submit them to a kind of deconstruction. My first deconstructive attempt is of the very terms themselves: Turner seems to be ascribing a quite idiosyncratic meaning to them, on top of their more conventional one. Take for example their definitions in a dictionary. Revelation is 'making known something that was secret or hidden', while to reveal is to 'make something known'. Divination is 'foretelling the future by supernatural means', while to divine is to 'sense (something) by intuition, to guess or reveal (something hidden, especially the future) by magical means' (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*). Of course, one cannot expect anthropologists to literally stick to the meanings offered in a dictionary as it is the latter which get enriched or even critically handled by the ethnographer's touch. For instance, exploring the word 'garden' among the Trobrianders, Malinowski demonstrates its plural significance in its various different contexts: 'The figment of a dictionary is as dangerous theoretically as it is useful practically' (1935:22), he exclaims at some point.

Turner disregards the dictionary's definition that divination is mainly a foretelling of the future, and in this he finds me in complete agreement. As many Cuban diviners stress, oracles reveal 'past, present and future' (*pasado, presente y futuro*) or, else, (aspects of) one's 'path' (*camino*). Turner challenges the dictionary in another sense: while revelation is defined as making something known, to divine is essentially to reveal something by magical or supernatural means. The distinction implies that the former operates by non-supernatural means, or at least, not

necessarily by supernatural means, and because of this it is thus presented as an umbrella term. Turner's use, in the context of the Ndembu rituals, takes both to participate to the supernatural. This reveals the potential of revelation to make something known by supernatural means, but this is not constitutive of its definition; what is, is to make something known irrespective of the means. What this seems to suggest is that revelation is a more encompassing act than divination. Let us not forget, though, that the distinction in these terms is made by Turner and not by the Ndembu. The latter, according to him, have just one word, *kusolola* (1975:15). Revelation and divination, hence, present us with two different aspects of something that accommodates both—*kusolola*. It is this more general approach by Turner that I find inspiring, rather than the specific content of 'revelation' as that which makes visible the 'unitary flow of experience', and of 'divination' as those instances and individuals that set themselves apart from that flow.

The contents of both terms seem quite obscure and their universalizing aspirations render the Ndembu ethnography a mere illustration of Turner's theoretical models. To me, the claim that there is a unitary flow of life that transcends divisions, differences and structures appears quite unconvincing, although in some respects as powerful as Durkheim's 'collective effervescence'. Turner seems to suggest that equality and homogeneity are interchangeable terms and, furthermore, that these are the 'natural' and 'universal' conditions of humanity. On the other hand, he equates diversity with structures and oppositions, which are constructed and social. Why should equality and identity be constitutive of each other, in the same way as alterity and opposition? This remains a very problematic notion which might be revealing of Turner's worldview rather than that of the Ndembu. As the Ndembu do, I have chosen to employ one term—as indeed the Cubans themselves do, that of 'divination' (*adivinación*)—and explore its various contents without these leading to the constitution of different terms. The diversity of the contents could point to the fact that there are various kinds of divinations.

Indeed, in the Cuban context, *adivinación*, like *religión*, might be an umbrella term when it comes to referring to the communication with 'the beyond' in general, but one soon realizes that 'the beyond' is constituted by not only a plurality of other-than-human entities, but also of different kinds. The most basic distinction that my

thesis deals with is that between spirits of the dead and deities. Lucia's comments in the beginning of the chapter alluded to the former, while Fernando's brief account to the latter. Communication with the dead—*los muertos*—exhibits some vital differences from that with deities such as the *orichas*. This can be demonstrated by the ways in which they are communicated with: *muertos* do so mainly through the diviner's body and senses; the *orichas* mainly through the diviner's use of consecrated objects. Differences also lie in what each kind tends to 'say' through divination. As I will show in more detail later, the *muertos*' perspectives tend to be more idiosyncratic, closely linked to their biographies, and they normally reveal information about specific events and aspects of one's life. The *orichas*' perspectives, on the other hand, tend to be broader in scope and able to reveal one's life as a whole. The messages of each kind, consequently, speak to a relatively different kind of dimension of one's life, create different kinds of commitments with those entities, and might lead to different subsequent actions. Yet, contrary to Turner, the distinctions do not necessarily lead to oppositions, neither does encompassment and coexistence to the dissolving of such distinctions. What I wish to preserve from Turner's already deconstructed model is the two broad tendencies I just described of the oracular instantiation of the dead and deities. The former tend to reveal the 'flow of life' in its specificity and as particular points—what Turner calls 'divination'—while the latter do so in a more encompassing dimension, even to the extent of revealing the whole of it—what he calls 'revelation'. This kind of flow does not speak to humanity in general, but to the individual's life-course or 'path', and this confronts us with an inevitable engagement between divination and destiny. I hereby mention Horton's contribution to such an understanding.

A much more relevant ethnography to the Cuban context is that of the Kalabari as presented by Robin Horton (1962). The Kalabari, he argues, have four levels of existence. The first, *tomi kiri*, is 'the place of the people' (Horton 1962:199), which includes all things tangible and visible to common human perception and experience. Then, there are another three levels, *teme*, *so* and *tamuno*, which are what Horton sets out to describe in detail. He translates *teme* as 'spirit' (1962:199), something that is highly reminiscent of what the Cubans call 'the beyond'. *Teme* can be divided in three broad categories of ('free') spirits which can

be perceived only by particular persons—the diviners—or by ordinary men through their effects. The first category is that of '*duen*—the ancestors' (1962:200). These are people who once lived and died in Kalabari communities and are 'thought of as pursuing desires and values similar to those they pursued in life' (1962:200). These desires are not so much individualistic or idiosyncratic (in fact, Horton portrays an image of the Kalabari individual as immersed in the community roles and responsibilities) but distil down to the wellbeing of their lineage descendants, as long as they are adequately appeased. On the contrary, and this goes for the rest of the spirits as well, they bring misfortune.

The second category is that of '*am'oru*—village heroes' (1962:200). The heroes too were once living persons and cohabited with the Kalabari in their communities. Nevertheless, they are very often depicted as not being related to the latter in kinship terms; they came from afar, they brought and established new laws and ways of life and '[f]inally, instead of dying like the ancestors, the heroes disappeared into the sky or into the ground. They were not buried, and they left no descendants behind them' (1962:200). While the ancestors interact with and influence the fate of their lineage groups, the heroes do so with the whole village. Breaches in the specific customs they introduced would cause misfortune to the whole village, while their observance would fortify its welfare.

The third category is that of '*owuamapu*—the water people' (1962:201). They do not coexist with people but live underwater in their own villages. Although their mode of behaviour can be human-like, what is highlighted is their 'polymorphism' (1962:201) in that they may appear to humans as humans, pythons or rainbows. Their relative deviation and distance from humanity (both in spatial and ontological terms) is, according to Horton, congruent with that of their sociality; the water people instantiate aspects of the 'extra-social' (1962:202) domain. For example, they are identified with the rivers and the sea, the weather conditions and the abundance of fish—the Kalabari's main economic activity is fishing—positive and negative human behaviour that goes off the beaten track of social norms (such as innovations, possession of extreme wealth and power whether or not ill-acquired, not meeting up social roles such as parenthood, madmen, for example). In other words,

water people are identified with natural or social forces that escape the immediacy and familiarity of the Kalabari normative order.

It is here that Horton introduces a kind of ethnographic analysis that I find extremely useful when it comes to the Cuban spirit-world, which also confronts us with a similar multiplicity. All three categories of the Kalabari spirits are depicted as different in relation to each other and the living. However, the potential for cooperation is evident. Their differences do not lead to an absolute negation of relations but, on the contrary, is constitutive of them. It is only because they are different that they can relate; and furthermore the differences emerge through their very relations. The ancestors provide for the immediate world of the lineages, the heroes for the village and the water people for the external, but still surrounding world. Horton describes how in myth and in rite the three categories might be related (1962:202-204). For instance, heroes and water people might have worked together in order to introduce a new custom or institution to the village; ancestors and heroes used to live together; ancestors and water people might have also collaborated for similar innovations. Furthermore, such relations might be revealed as conflicts as well, whereby ancestors, for example, fought against water people and by making alliances with certain heroes. In rites as well, festivals might be dedicated to all three categories, yet, the offerings and chants are clearly defined and separated for each kind of spirits. In this sense, the Cuban ethnography bares striking resemblances. Although spirits of the dead and deities might be appeased in the same broad ritual context, there is no confusion as to what kind of entity is being contacted and honoured. Thus, the three categories of spirits come to form a 'triangle' in which 'the relations of each category to its neighbours contain elements of oppositions as well as of co-operation' (1962:203). Horton's depiction of such relations is both analytical and synthetical at the same time.

He proceeds into describing the two remaining levels of experience (1962:204-207): each individual in birth is created by a personal spiritual entity called '*tamuno*', which joins the spirit to his or her body. Before this joining, the person's spirit will spell out to its creator its life-course and this will be inscribed in its very constitution. 'What is thus spoken is known as *fiete boye*—'speech before coming', or more briefly as *so*—'destiny'' (1962:205). The individual's life is

affected and intercepted by the three categories of spirits but *so* ‘covers the whole pattern of this interaction’ (1962:205). *So* as destiny, thus, does not refer to a particular interaction with a particular kind of spirit, or to isolated points of one’s life-course but to its totality. A specific misfortune might be the outcome of the relation between the person and an ancestor, hero or one of the water people, but when the same kind of misfortune repeats itself, it will tend to be attributed to one’s *so* (see also 1962:213-214). In a similar fashion, there is a *so* of lineages, *polo teme so*—‘lineage destiny’ (1962:205)—and of the village, *ama teme so*—‘village destiny’ (1962:206). The fourth level is called *tamuno*, conceived as the creator of everything that exists in the world. This is distinguished by the personal creator of each individual and it is often called *opu tamuno*—‘the Creator God’ (1962:206). There are no elaborate myths or rites for this entity and no other kinds of direct relations with it:

Of the two terms, *tamuno* seems the more appropriate when the original creation of the world is mentioned, while *so* seems more appropriate when the subject is the behaviour of what has been created [...] In some contexts, then, *Tamuno* and *so* refer to the two great roles of a single supreme being; *tamuno* being concerned with the origin of things and *so* with their destiny (1962:206).

Considering that *tamuno* signifies the creator force while *so* the created outcome, the former encompasses the latter when it comes to the wider cosmos and the individual, while the opposite occurs for the lineage groups and the village, that is, social groupings that are of more immediate importance both to the individual and the wider cosmos. In any case, both *tamuno* and *so* are ‘principles’ (1962:207) that defy direct and immediate action upon them, they are less anthropomorphic, reveal patterns (or aspects of them) rather than specific points in one’s life-course and, ultimately, cannot be escaped from:

Such contrasts follow from the place of these higher beings in the total scheme of things. For when the human spirit acts upon one of the free spirits in ritual, it is trying to influence a being that exists alongside itself and is of the same order. But when the same human spirit approaches *tamuno* or *so*, it is approaching a being who already determines its fortunes—a being of whose will its every action is a manifestation (1962:207).

Horton goes on to compare the Kalabari universe, with all its ordered models of existence, to scientific models (1962:207-214). Criticizing Lévy-Bruhl’s distinction between primitive, ‘mystical thinking’ and ‘rational thought’, he sets out to argue

that both scientific thinking and the Kalabari proceed in a very similar fashion. Without being able to go into much detail here, both proceed from the immediate observable world of ‘things’ to a successive modelling of them into categories, which tend to become more and more abstract. More encompassing levels of reality may host the apparent discrepancies of immediate observation not because they can explain everything in detail but because they have reduced (rather than superseded) them, creating a ‘hierarchy of models’ (1962:211) or ‘structural hybrids’ (1962:212); as with the Kalabari universe:

The scientist’s world, then, has several levels of reality. Each level, moreover, has a set of descriptive categories which is particular to itself and inapplicable to other levels [...] As we ascend from level to level, fewer and fewer of the categories appropriate to the description of observable reality apply; until, as physicists often like to emphasize, their highest-order models are not really material at all. This dematerialization of successive levels of reality is a consequence of one of the basic functions of explanation—that of unifying apparent diversity (1962:211).

This provides Horton with a mode of analysis that transgresses the Durkheimian model of religion and gods as ultimately reflecting society (see Durkheim 2008), because it also encompasses the rest of the observable world (what one could call the ‘natural’ world), social transformation and innovation, anti-social behaviour and, even, things eluding immediate observation and conceptualization. Particular incidents in the Kalabari experience will be identified with the free spirits, while life seen in its totality would require the more abstract models of *tamuno* and *so*, creator and destiny. This can also account for the Kalabari embracing the Christian God, identifying ‘Him’ with their unitary conception of *tamuno* (1962:214). Since the relative isolation of the Kalabari villages and the delta world has been opened up to more foreign influences, ‘successive levels of Kalabari reality are committed to explaining more and more in terms of less and less’ (1962: 214).

Many points that Horton makes can be endlessly debated. I do not think, for instance, that his distance from Durkheim is as great as stated. He suggests that the Kalabari worldview is ‘based on a theoretical model whose prototype are Kalabari people’ (1962:212). Thus, science’s prototype is the natural world, whilst the Kalabaris’ is their selves and the way they interact with the surrounding environment. As with Durkheim then, Horton tends to imply that these models are conceptual rather than perceptual (see Durkheim 2008:327-335) and that they are

responses *to* the world rather than *of* it (see Lambek 2002:8). It would have been interesting to acquire an ethnographic image of how the Kalabari through their diviners come to perceive all these ‘intangible’ beings. But instead of engaging negatively with Horton, let us explore the ways his point of view can be productive. Although his comparison between the Kalabari worldview and scientific thinking is not considered a very common or attractive avenue of anthropological analysis nowadays, I detect something valuable in it. If both depart from observable reality and proceed into a construction of models that can accommodate or explain ‘more and more in terms of less and less’ (Horton 1962:214), this implies that the two apparently different ways of thinking are similar in approach and method. Therefore, it could be argued that the two are not distinguished on an epistemological or cognitive level—how reality is understood—but on something other than that. Something similar can be, in admittedly a highly selective manner, extracted from Evans-Pritchard’s comments on Zande witchcraft: ‘Witchcraft explains *why* events are harmful to man and not *how* they happen. A Zande perceives how they happen just as we do’ (1990:24).

Both Horton and Evans-Pritchard provide interesting potential insights into how we might go about understanding ‘beliefs’ in spirits, oracles, destiny and magic, yet they ultimately opt for a more socio and anthropocentric kind of analysis that views such beliefs as both conceptual and symbolic models of representation. The hint lies in the fact that if they argue that the Kalabari and the Azande perceive reality as ‘we do’, then spirits, oracles and so forth are a different kind of reality that is perceived. Thus, the anthropological engagement with them can be directed not towards questions of *why* but of *what*. The oracular questions and answers of *why* the Azande pose to the oracle, pertain and yield answers to *what* ‘things’ and substances—‘witchcraft’—may participate in and influence Zande life (and death); the oracles being constitutive of them and, thus, allowing us to glimpse at *what* they perceive as real. Equally, if both the Kalabari models and the scientific ones proceed in the same way, what *is* different, are the models themselves. This is what Horton argues, if I read him correctly: the differences are not ‘epistemological’ but ‘ontological’, as Viveiros de Castro would argue (see Viveiros de Castro 1998,

2004a; for a further discussion on this, see chapter 6), and, thus, not merely conceptual but perceptual (see Merleau-Ponty 2002).

In other words, to treat Zande witchcraft as a kind of belief located in the mind and shared among the group, pushes the ethnographer, Evans-Pritchard in this case, to offer a kind of analysis that takes for granted, and uses as an indispensable tool, the assumption that witches and their craft, ‘after all’, do not really exist. Therefore, they must mean something else other than what they ‘believe’ them to be or do. Evans-Pritchard argues that beliefs in witches, their motivations, means and effects represent and regulate antisocial behaviour. Thus, witchcraft becomes a kind of technique—an ‘epistemology’ in Viveiros de Castro’s terms—that mistakenly or unconsciously refers to correct and tangible things—antisocial behaviour. More (or better, less) than analysis, this leads to *dialysis* of the Azande themselves, their ‘beliefs’ and of, what I suspect is missing, a richer ethnographic description on what the Azande perceive through the oracles and, ultimately, instances of witchcraft.

This will be one of the main preoccupations of my thesis, namely, not so much *why* or *how* Cubans ‘see’ reality through spirits of the dead, deities and oracles, but *what* kind of reality they see. If divination initially appears to be a way to perceive reality, maybe it is more fruitful to explore it as the very (instantiation of) reality itself. Of course, from the human point of view, divination is a means of perceiving ‘the beyond’ and different kinds of other-than-human entities are perceived differently, as I will describe in the following chapters. But if divination pertains to the very perception of them, epistemology and ontology cannot be strictly separated or opposed; they appear to participate in one and the same thing.

Horton’s contribution is also one of the very few ethnographic accounts I am aware of that explicitly links divination with destiny (see also Fortes 1983), although unfortunately without offering too much ethnographic detail on divination. Whereas the three categories of spirits exist externally to the person, the individual ‘destiny’—*so*—becomes a force that potentially brings them together. According to Horton, the human and the spirit world constitute a ‘first-order explanatory model’ (1962:213). Its prototype, as said before, is the Kalabari people, that is, the most immediate and observable dimension. Each successive category (ancestors, heroes and water people) retains something of the prototype but gradually and

simultaneously denounces aspects of it as we ascend the order. Ancestors are ex-kin and members of the lineages of the community, heroes are non-kin, strangers who became members of the community, and water people are 'extra-social' forces that partially have human-like characteristics. According to this model, there is a structure ranging from immediate observable reality and sociality to extra-social and less tangible forces, wherein each category has its own specific characteristics contrasted and potentially (but necessarily) opposed to the one below but also, and because of that, encompassing it: 'each level unifies phenomena which appear disparate at the level below it' (1962:213).

I believe that Horton's scheme is a step forward in reflecting on the Cuban phenomenon of divination and destiny. Although he portrays a quite neat model of successive levels and the structuring of which sounds quite outdated, it proves useful in transcending the obscurities of Turner's model. Instead of a tension between the unitary flow of life and its division, we now have a more encompassing image of contrasts and relations that can be accommodated into a whole. In Cuba, *muertos* influence one's life and destiny, but they do so without necessarily revealing the whole pattern of it. It is only cumulatively and retrospectively that one's interaction with a specific *muerto* can be perceived as inherent of his or her *camino*, his or her entire biography. The *orichas*, through the oracles, have the capacity to reveal whole patterns of one's *camino*, or the most significant aspects of the whole of it. This is instantiated in cases of initiation. It is then that a *camino* or stable aspects of it are revealed. The perspectives of *muertos* and those of the *orichas* can thus be hierarchically modelled but, as with Horton, not because one is inherently valued as better or more significant than the other: each is better, as it were, in its own domain, in its specialization; and this is their respective limit as well. *Muertos* are better equipped in revealing the specificities of one's life because they participate in it much more intensely and intimately; but this means that they are less equipped to reveal the broader picture as a result of this. With the *orichas* the opposite tendency applies. Their strength resides not so much in pinpointing the specificities of *caminos*, but in laying down the *camino* itself. Indeed, people whose lives are informed by *muertos* and *orichas* tend to explicitly refer to *camino* when it comes to the latter, and this is congruent with the diviners who employ their oracles, who

stress that what is revealed by the *orichas* is indiscriminately past, present *and* future. This is at least so on a primordial level and does not necessarily reflect the specificities of the client's situation. When *muertos* are mentioned in daily life, *camino* does not come up so explicitly or automatically. It is only a long-lasting relation with them that solidifies and is reflectively incorporated into one's *camino*. In their everyday manifestation, *muertos* are limited—in both positive and negative terms—to reveal the past, present *or* future.

A final addition to this quite broad sketch, which is indicative of what is to follow is the fact that the notion of destiny or fate (even more so than divination) has not fared very well in anthropological discourse. I believe that this is because of two recurrent kinds of understandings of it which are diametrically opposed. The first can be said to be that fate is something preordained and thus inescapable; what is written cannot be re-written. This is reminiscent of the myth of Oedipus. The myth, in short, goes like this: before Oedipus was born, his father Laius, King of Thebes, consulted the Delphic Oracle as his wife Iocaste could not conceive. The oracle announced that a child would be finally born but he would eventually murder Laius and marry Iocaste. Laius, thus, relinquished any efforts and desires for descendants. Nevertheless, one night Iocaste got him drunk and lured him into her bed. Nine months later she gave birth to Oedipus. Laius, trying to avoid fate, removed the newborn by abandoning it into the wilds, probably wishing that nature rather than himself would put an end to his life. One version has it that the baby was found by a shepherd from Corinth who gave it to Polybus and Periboea, the King and Queen of Corinth. They decided to adopt Oedipus as if he were their own child. One day, when Oedipus was an adult, he consulted the Delphic Oracle whereby the same prediction was uttered, this time referring to Oedipus himself: 'You will kill your own father and marry your own mother.' Once again, in the effort to avoid fate, Oedipus decides never to return to Corinth so as to protect the people who he thought were his parents. During his walkabouts, he meets Laius—his real father—gets into a fight with him and eventually kills him. He then arrives in Thebes after having solved the riddle of Sphinx—the beast with a woman's head and a lion's body and wings—liberating in that way Thebes from her ills. The citizens of Thebes welcomed the stranger who saved them by declaring him their new king and marrying him to

the widow Iocaste—his real mother. Thus, the twice uttered dramatic prophecy found its fulfilment in an equally dramatic way (for a more detailed account of the myth, see Graves 2001:343-349).

The myth of Oedipus may be read as an example of an unavoidable fate that has already been determined (often by a superior force). Nevertheless, it could be argued that from the human actors' point of view, the bigger part of the story is an effort to avoid fate—and hence revealing their assumptions or hopes—first by the actions of Laius and then by those of Oedipus himself, given the fact that the Delphic Oracle is consulted twice and reveals destiny (see Curry and Willis 2004:55; Herzfeld 1993:242). But it is exactly in and through this effort to avoid his fate that the divined fate comes to its tragic fulfilment. As Fortes says, Oedipus, in 'his resolute pursuit of the truth [...] is the victim of Destiny. The question of responsibility or guilt does not even seem to be relevant. It was an appalling Fate and not of his own choosing' (1983:4; see also pp. 32-37). A look at a dictionary corroborates such an image. Destiny is defined as the 'power believed to control events' or 'that which happens to somebody/something (thought to be decided beforehand by fate)', while fate as the 'power believed to control all events in a way that cannot be resisted; destiny' (*Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*).

Within these definitions, one can detect a diametrically opposed understanding of destiny as irrevocable and already preordained. In the second definition of it the dictionary informs us that it is 'that which happens to somebody/something (thought to be decided beforehand by fate).' Two interconnected things attract my attention in such a statement. The first is that as a definitional proposition the editor chooses to enclose its second half into a parenthesis, implying that its content is not absolutely necessary for the definition to apply. If one were to omit the parenthesis altogether, a definition would be that it stands for whatever happens to a subject or entity (be that an individual, a country, a concept or an object); a quite vague and idiosyncratic definition admittedly, as the 'only' things not applying to it would be precisely whatever *does not* happen to it. The second thing that draws my attention, and which I believe is an important reason why this second half has been bracketed, is the claim that destiny, as 'that which happens to somebody/something', may be (hence the parenthesis), '*thought* to be

decided beforehand by fate’ (my emphasis). This ‘(thought...)’, I contend, divides the world into those who ‘think’ or believe that destiny is ‘decided beforehand by fate’, the gods, the stars and the planets, for example, and those who believe it is not. Yet, my sense is that the latter are not so much depicted as those who ‘think’ so but as those who know; singing along with Doris Day in Hitchcock’s ‘The man who knew too much’, ‘*qué será será*, whatever will be will be, the future’s not ours to see, *qué será será*, what will be will be.’ It is the former who ‘think’—implicitly in a metaphysical, irrational and mistaken way—and this is why they deserve to be put in the parenthetical margins.

I believe that this distinction’s radicalism does not necessarily lie in a worldview that perceives a chain of events that are superimposed on a subject without its control and agency and another one which claims absolute freedom of movement. Although fate, as well as divination, speaks directly to what can be freely done and decided and what is superimposed, this is not an inherent and exclusive attribute of it.¹¹ This is a much broader issue that has puzzled human intellect and experience infinitely, the social sciences merely reflecting such preoccupations, may find it impossible to come to a final resolution,. What is more pertinent seems to be whether this apparent tension between determinism and self-determination is ‘thought’ to be related to ‘powers’ that can be divined, that is, entered into a dialogue with or not. In other words, and as far as the Cuban divinatory context is concerned, the anthropologically interesting issue is, not whether and how destiny can be fulfilled or avoided (as we will further see it can also be deviated from and realigned), but what and who participates in this dialogue. That humans do so can be taken as a fact; however, things start looking a bit more strange, and thus interesting, when ‘other-than-humans’ prove to be those with which the dialogue takes place.

A final comment: entities ‘against’ traditions.

If the ethnographer were to approach the Afro-Cuban cosmos through a highly conscious frame that distinguishes among various self-defined and delineated sets of traditions, it would be relatively easy to just focus on one of them as, indeed, people

¹¹ For interesting discussions on fate as something potentially predetermined or not, see Craig 1988; Curry 2010; Curry and Voss 2007; Curry and Willis 2004; Fortes 1983; Gerth and Mills 1948:70-74, 302-322, 358-359; Onians 1973; Turner 1981:3-28, 109-176; Weber 1958.

in Cuba do not have difficulty in pinpointing the existence of a *Regla de Ocha/Ifá*, *Palo Monte*, *Espiritismo*, *Vodú*, and so on. Such a legitimate strategy could be even more justified in the process of fieldwork as one will soon realize the complexity of each tradition, its relatively long and often obscure history and its internal distinctions, which point to the existence of ‘sub-traditions’ within the larger agglomerates (see Brown 2003a:1-162; Bolívar Aróstegui and González Díaz de Villegas 1998; Espirito Santo 2010; James Figarola *et.al.* 1998). As I have already mentioned, my approach was in this sense different. Trying to put aside my acquaintance with these more conventional approaches to Afro-Cuban religious traditions that informed my preparation for the field, my entrance to and exit from it remained consciously diffused to all of them as one of my persistent ethnographic questions was whether there was a more general Afro-Cuban cosmos that accommodated—although not always axiomatically, comfortably or automatically—all of the traditions. Furthermore why, if this was the case, had this not been explored in the conventional ethnographic accounts, even though all of them strongly implied this? In other words, why did these accounts not consider the multiplicity of a ‘supernatural’ universe, when they all in one way or another depicted this within each tradition?

In trying to be as open as possible, I was led to follow a path that many Cubans who were not actively participating in these traditions, by way of acquiring the ‘office’ of the priest or diviner, themselves followed, either as simple clients or compelled to a more complex and multifarious engagement that often involved initiations, but not necessarily led to full-time priesthood. I soon came to realize that people, when faced with an issue worthy of oracular investigation, would start consulting a very wide range of diviners. I use the word ‘compelled’ in a loose yet not insignificant way. Faced with this multiple range of oracular traditions, it is very easy to start ‘reading’ the whole Afro-Cuban oracular phenomenon as one permeated with a very open and idiosyncratic approach, wherein clients and initiates walk into a vast religious shopping centre and just pick up the most convenient or attractive product; a ‘spiritual *laissez-faire*’ (Romberg 2009:2; see also Delgado 2009; Hagedorn 2001:203-233; but, also see Espirito Santo 2008:170-175; Holbraad 2005).

In stark contrast to the actual supermarkets, shops and malls one might expect to find in more affluent countries, Cuba's seem extremely poorly equipped and inconsistent. The Cuban religious 'market' on the other hand appears to be full of different choices, 'ready to hand'. Furthermore, it is a 'market' that eludes the socialist state's strict control and often appears to be working against the very foundations and ideals of socialist means of production, property, labour and prices, which are all regulated by the state. This image is very much accentuated if one takes into account an increasing number of foreigners who visit Cuba in order to get initiated or at least bring their own issues there and who end up, as with any other transaction, paying a much higher price than Cubans do. These phenomena are very real and ethnographically unavoidable. Yet, I believe, it would be extremely hasty and potentially misleading to commence with description and interpretation through these admittedly more familiar lenses of a specific mode of production and transaction and as such treat spirits, deities, initiations and offerings as mere 'products' of, and for human choice. Although one could reach deep levels of 'sociological imagination' (see Mills 2000) by arguing, for example *a la* Comaroff (1985), that this unique phenomenon of a capitalist-like 'spiritual' and 'material' free market that permeates the Afro-Cuban religious cosmos in the very midst of an otherwise socialist mode of regulation and restriction, could potentially be an enclave of resistance to almost 50 years of socialist government, one could, on the other hand, be compromising his or her anthropological imagination.

CHAPTER 2

HUMAN DESIRES AS DIVINATION the perspectives of the ‘alien’ *muertos* and the *nfumbi*

This chapter and the following one attempt to come to terms with the generic category of the dead—the *muertos*. When other-than-human entities are said to interfere in the world of the living, a broad distinction that is made is that between spirits of the dead and divinities. An individual that has a multiplicity of entities that inform and affect his or her life will attribute specific characteristics and aspects of it, whether more or less permanent, to specific spirits of the dead. The ones who affect a more permanent influence will often come to be seen and described as ‘my dead’ (*mis muertos*). Nevertheless, this possessive pronoun—‘my’—which, when utilized to describe the current totality of the dead who are associated with one’s self, is normally followed by the plural—*muertos*—gets instantly individuated and ‘de-possessed’ when particular *muertos* appear and affect someone’s life for a relatively short period and often in a negative way. Occasionally, *muertos* that are not perceived to ‘belong’ (*pertenecer*) to the individual may interfere with it. Those who can sense them, the ‘mediums’ (*mediums*), detect their presence ‘around’ (*alrededor*) or ‘behind’ (*detrás*) the individual and, provided that they do not ‘belong’ to it, they ‘send them away’ (*echarlos*) or ‘remove’ and ‘take them off’ (*quitarselos de encima*). In this case, the individual will hardly refer to them as ‘my dead’ but as a *muerto* of which little is known and its influence has been highly transient, somewhat mischievous, upsetting the ‘normal’ course of things.

Thus, within the generic category of *muertos* we encounter a broad division between an actually rich and complex spectrum of ‘spectres’, depending on the degrees of intimacy, from the complete lack of it, to its excessive intensity. As this division is based on the premise that there are *muertos* who ‘belong’ to someone and those who do not, the former showing ‘affinity’ (*afinidad*) and the latter not, I have come to call them ‘affine’ and ‘alien’ *muertos* respectively. This chapter deals with those that gravitate towards the one end, that of lack of intimacy; the ‘alien’ *muertos*, who due and true to their ‘alien-ness’—which, as I will describe further on,

characterizes both their condition and their affects on the living. Furthermore, they have not been made the exclusive and predominant ‘object’ of interaction with any particular tradition, but are diffused in none and all of them at the same time; often treated with indifference or as a threat. This is, I suspect, the reason why their silent and elusive presence has rendered them relatively absent from most ethnographic accounts on Afro-Cuban ‘metaphysics’, and why I strongly believe that my approach, which permeates the whole thesis and places the emphasis on dealing more directly with the various kinds of other-than-human entities, rather than traditions from the outset, has its merits.

‘Alien’ *muertos* are not a purely individualistic category, meaning that they are not those who do not just belong to a particular living person but might belong to somebody else. If this is the case, the *muerto* is not perceived as ‘alien’ but as an ‘affine’. ‘Alien’ *muertos* are those that are perceived as not belonging to anybody, and it is this radical absence of relations and lack of ‘affinity’ that mediums often describe when they refer to how they experience their peculiar presence. *Muertos* in general, lacking a physical body, communicate with the living through other peoples’ bodies. It is said that each *muerto* chooses to ‘get attached’ (*se apega*) to a particular living body. One of the main reasons for misfortunes, when seen as stemming from the dead, is that of neglect (the same goes for divinities as we shall see in chapter 4). The foundations of the connection between the living and the dead are, thus, the active effort on the part of the former to ‘grant recognition’ or ‘acknowledge’ (*dar conocimiento*) to the latter, the very initial stage of which is that of their presence and identity. Furthermore, the basic material from which this bridge is made, is the living human body.

For example, Pedro, a young friend of mine was experiencing strong migraines which impeded him from concentrating on his studies at the university. Seeking advice from specialists or gifted people (who do not only have the ability to sense and communicate with their own *muertos* but also with those of others), he was told that the migraines were coming from a *muerto* who was trying to communicate his presence to him. The *muerto*, a remote ancestor of his who lived and died in the colonial era of Cuba, was provoking the migraines not because of his mischievous character or just to make him suffer, but as an articulation of his presence—since

Pedro did not have the capacity to sense him in any fuller way—which, was something that only the medium could do. Such a *muerto* belongs to the category of the spirits of the dead that I deal with in the following chapter, the ‘affines’. In this chapter, I initially deal with those *muertos* that could be grouped into what I have called ‘alien’; and then with those with whom, although a very specific kind of relation is being forged through the Afro-Cuban religious tradition of *Palo Monte*, are drawn from this generic reservoir of ‘alien’ *muertos* and transform into, what the *Palo Monte* idiom refers to as, the *nfumbi*.

The distinction between ‘affine’ and ‘alien’ *muertos* I am proposing here, is widely documented ethnographically and is reminiscent of what Bloch and Parry call, in their introduction to *Death and the Regeneration of Life*, ‘good’ and ‘bad’ death (1996:15-18): ‘The “good” regenerative death can only be constructed in antithesis to an image of “bad” death, which it therefore implies’ (1996:18). What may describe a ‘bad’ death is not necessarily exhausted in the negative effects over the living:

The worst thing about ‘bad deaths’ is that they mar or detract from that possible completeness. ‘Missing presumed dead’ obscures the final image; the abruptness of an accident distorts it, and so cuts it short in a different way’ (Parkin 1986:8),

thus,

[...] evil refers to various ideas of imperfection and excess seen as destructive; but these are contestable concepts which, when personified, allow mankind to engage them in dialogue and reflect on the boundaries of humanity (Parkin 1986:23).

It seems to be a widely spread phenomenon that the importance given to what happens after death is intimately linked to the kind of life and relations the individual had and also, commonly linked to the former, the kind of funeral that was conducted by the living. In addition, the kind of death as linked to the kind of person and its relations has particular repercussions for the living and their relations to the deceased. An anti-social person, a violent or sudden death and an improper funeral or, even more so, the absence of it, are all factors that make a negative journey for the deceased’s spirit highly possible, something which is also reflected in how it relates negatively with the living (for a classic description of such ethnographic phenomenon, see Hertz 1960:27-86).

‘Alien’ *muertos*, in Cuba, also seemed to be persons burdened with a ‘bad death’, while ‘affines’ were privileged with a ‘good’ one. Indeed, many ‘alien’ *muertos* and, even more so, the *nfumbi* were often depicted as persons who had led an anti-social life or had suffered an untimely or violent death, and this was exactly the indigenous reasoning for them being in such sort of ‘alien’ state. For instance, the *nfumbi* of *Palo Monte* could often be persons who had been assassins or their victims, suicides, alcoholics or mad-men, among others. On the contrary, ‘affine’ *muertos* tended to lack this negative and marginal state and, therefore, were considered as previously—when alive—more socialized and currently—as dead—more socializable entities; as such the relations instantiated with them were experienced in more positive terms. Nevertheless, and as Parkin implies above, ‘bad’ and ‘good’ deaths cannot be limited to a moral understanding of them, but also, and more importantly, better conceived as different facets or directions—with their various degrees of completeness and incompleteness—life-courses may adopt in contexts where, provocatively put, ‘death is not the end’ or, less so, is the end of something and the beginning of something else.

As this chapter and the next one will try to show ethnographically, confining the description and analysis to purely moral terms of (what is perceived as) ‘good’ and ‘bad’ deaths, would probably miss very important aspects of personhood and the boundaries and relations between the living and the dead that appear to be instantiated. Rather, a more promising avenue, I suggest, could be to follow the various notions of a *camino* that both the living and the dead are perceived to have and at various instances articulate to each other and even exchange. This could account for the ethnographic fact that not all ‘alien’ *muertos* necessarily were morally ‘bad’ while in life or had died an untimely death; and by the same token, not all ‘affines’ were morally impeccable personalities or had died a peaceful death. It neither meant that ‘alien’ *muertos*’ affects on the living were always deemed as negative nor that those of the ‘affines’ as by definition positive.

Very broadly put, ‘alien’ *muertos* lack a potentiality to relate to the living and, at the same time, cannot fully relate with their condition as dead, meaning that they cannot properly relate to their ‘new’, dead and disembodied self. On the other hand, ‘affines’ are *muertos* who have adopted a ‘a path of the dead’ (*camino de*

muerto; a ‘path’ in which the *muerto* progressively and with the indispensable help from its living ‘affine’ starts ‘othering’ itself from its human and embodied biography), broadening, in such way, their potentials of relating to the living. *Nfumbi*, as I will show in the second part of this chapter, are a strange and therefore interesting case which upsets any rigid, conventional and dualistic understanding of *muertos* between ‘alien’ and ‘affines’, but can also reveal a lot about them as well and, in general, aspects of what to be and become a *muerto* in Cuba involves.

Broken *caminos*: the ‘alien’ *muertos*’ vain effort to relate

In classic analyses, such as Hertz’s (1960), stemming usually from small-scale, non-Western societies, there is an abundance of information on the social relations of the deceased as well as the mortuary rites that are observed. Furthermore, having to do with small-scale societies, both the particular social relations among persons and the mortuary rites are highly condensed in space. A funeral, even of a commoner, is an event that happens in the knowledge and with the participation of a large part of the society under the ethnographer’s scrutiny. The fate of the deceased is equally informed by his or her past while in life because there is enough memory retained and lots of living witnesses; a fact that transforms the latter into useful ‘informants’ for the ethnographer. In my fieldwork experience in Havana, I was met with quite a different situation. Although there was surprisingly abundant talk about *muertos* and their influence on the living, there was an equally surprising lack of first-hand knowledge of the *muertos*’ past. The latter would be revealed by the *muertos* themselves in a gradual effort and process of communication with the living. I constantly felt that Cuba’s *muertos*, or at least a large number of them, were striving to establish a communication with the living because the latter had forgotten them or did not even know anything about them in the first place. It is not surprising then that the initial stages of the *muertos*’ presence were often associated with a kind of bewilderment or specific misfortunes, especially in cases where the living were not equipped with the ‘gift’ (*don*) to fully recognize such presence, and needed the guidance of those who did have it.

Yet, there was also a large number of *muertos* who seemed to cause puzzlement or misfortune just for the sake of it, or because of their own state of

confusion. The gifted people would come to the service of the afflicted not to negotiate and establish a kind of positive relation between the two parts, but in order to distance them. They would act in such a way so as to defend the afflicted living and attack the afflicting *muerto*, that is, disassociate and keep them apart. This kind of *muertos* were invariably described as ‘dark’ (*oscuros*), ‘obsessing’ (*obsesores*), ‘attached to matter’ (*pegados a la materia*), ‘evil’ (*malos*), ‘backwards’ (*atrasados*), ‘of little or no light’ (*de poca o ninguna luz*) or ‘sent’ (*enviados*). They were also seen as ‘wandering aimlessly in the world’ (*van vagando por el mundo*). This temporary kind of relation between these *muertos* and the living was usually initiated by the former and terminated by the latter. People do not relate with them in a more permanent and ontological sense, meaning, they do not include them in their *camino*. As soon as their presence is detected the specialist’s role will be to ‘remove’ (*quitar*) them from their attachment to a particular living body. When I asked specialists what happens to these *muertos* as soon as they are removed, I always received quite general and vague answers. Most often, people would tell me that they—the *muertos*—would keep on with their ‘aimless wandering’ and they would occasionally get attached to other people, causing once again misfortunes. Answers like these, sounding more like hypotheses or suggestions rather than convictions, were in contrast to the much higher degree of confidence mediums would exhibit in detecting or recounting the identification of the ‘affine’ *muertos*’ presence and attachment to a particular individual. Prompted by such contrast, I sometimes enquired whether their general ability to ‘sense’ (*sentir*) the *muertos* included those spirits who were attached neither temporarily nor permanently to nobody. The answers I gathered were most often negative. They were not experiencing, in other words, a world crammed with the constant presence of an infinity of ‘aimlessly wandering’ *muertos*, although a mass of anonymous dead could be theoretically, at least, envisioned.

I have only met one person, Raul, who described to me his visceral experiences with such a mass of anonymous dead without necessarily signalling out particular identities and biographies. He was around 45 years old (although he looked much younger); he was slightly physically deformed, unmarried and lived with his old and sick mother. He told me that this mass would ‘present itself’ (*se me presenta*)

in dreams, as a very deep and creepy darkness from which a multiplicity of usually indiscernible voices could be heard. Sometimes, in the midst of this darkness, he would see flashing images of persons unknown to him, usually close-ups of their faces, but also of fleeting events that would occur to them, presumably while in life, and normally unpleasant in nature. For instance, he once saw a black slave being beaten to death by his master. Interestingly, he added that this image was most probably the ‘persistent memory’ (*la memoria persistente*) of the slave who, having suffered such an unjust life and death, had been ‘Entrapped in the shadows of this world [*atrapado en las sombras de este mundo*].’ Nevertheless, it could also be the memories of the master whose unjustness and cruelty could equally be reasons for such an ‘entrapment’. ‘In fact’, he said, ‘It does not matter whose memory exactly it was, it could be of both; a memory in any case!’ As he also told me, experiencing the anonymous mass of the dead in such a way was extremely uncommon and even in the case of images like the above, they were elusive, in the sense that there was little possibility of obtaining further information about the particular events or the people involved. The reasoning implied in instances such as this was that the events or memories were of the dead, who were unrelated in a more ‘permanent’ sense to the living; they could not fully attach themselves to a living body through which to communicate with. As such, the above image was more a ‘persistent’ and fragmented ‘memory’ of slavery and its cruel conditions rather than a more fully articulated memory in it, where the event and its protagonists could offer a biography; something which does occur when *muertos* relate to the living more dialogically and permanently (as is the case with the ‘affines’).

Another way of experiencing the anonymous mass of *muertos* by Raul was while he was awake, though the experience was even more abstract and elusive. At times, when he was not only physically alone, but when he ‘felt really alone’, usually sitting at home without moving or doing anything in particular, he would sense his ‘vision and mind’ (*vista y mente*) becoming ‘cloudy’ (*nublada*). There would be an instant diminishing of his senses. The space (usually in his apartment, but sometimes outside) would become darker (although not as completely as in his dreams) and images more hazy; sounds would also decrease, and even become extinguished, as well as his touch becoming stiff. In fact, his whole body would become numb and

remain unable to move; his thoughts would vanish, leaving him in a ‘vacant’ (*vacío*), ‘with no direction’ (*sin dirección*) and ‘pointless’ (*sin sentido*) state: ‘as if I were dead’, he concluded. For my friend, this was the effect and affect of the anonymous dead on him; temporary and impersonal, still, aimless and dark, among others.

This account is strongly reminiscent of the one given by Todd Ramón Ochoa (2007) in which one of his main ‘informants’, Isidra, a practitioner of the Cuban-Congo religious tradition of *Palo*, also gives accounts of her experiences of the anonymous mass of the dead, referring to it as a ‘sea’ or, in the Cuban-Congo idiom, as *Kalunga* (Ochoa 2007:481-484, 2010b:31-39). *Kalunga* is a word which, according to Ochoa’s ethnography, depicts the anonymous collectivity of the dead as a ‘fluid mass’, ‘[i]mmanent, as in saturating, as in suffusing’, full of ‘shadows and flows’, ‘ancient beyond memory’, ‘dense and indistinguishable mass’, ‘indifferent’, ‘infinite’ and ‘ambient’ (2007:482-483). This experience of *Kalunga* was felt by Isidra through her body ‘from the murk of visceral experience, at times powerfully moving, at others fleetingly vague’ (2007:482):

[T]hese visceral events as did Isidra, as minor actualizations, or versions, of *Kalunga* [...] as a kind of vibration or tonal shifting in the fluid vastness of *Kalunga*. Thus, *Kalunga* was tangibly learned as radically subjective perceptions at the absolute limits of sentience and credibility, felt subjectively yet collectively influential, and, in the case of *Palo*, recognized and taught as significant turns of the dead [...] an ephemeral sensation [...] felt at the fringes of perception: the chills, the vibes (2007:482).

Thus, Isidra and Raul, in slightly different ways, sense the ‘indifferent’ (undifferentiated probably is a more adequate term) sea of the dead in a vague yet recognizable manner, or as Ochoa calls it, as a ‘sense un-certainty’ (2007:486). But in Ochoa’s account and in my fieldwork, sensing uncertain-ly (to paraphrase him) undifferentiated *muertos* was transformed into a much more concrete visceral and affective experience when a particular *muerto* would enter into a relation with a particular individual. It is here that my approach differs from Ochoa’s. While he highlights the primacy of *Kalunga*’s oneness, vagueness, infinity and indifferent immanence which leads at times to the experience of more tangible, differentiated and individuated *muertos*, who importantly become ‘one’s *muertos*’, I suspect that quite the opposite might be at stake.

I will explore whether it is the more certain viscosity of differentiated *muertos* that ‘lends’, as it were, to this ‘sense un-certainty’ of the anonymous sea of

the dead. To paraphrase Ochoa once again, it might not be that the dead (as an individuated plurality) are ‘versions’ or ‘aspects’ (Ochoa 2007) of the dead (as an undifferentiated mass of the dead or, as I read Ochoa, ‘death’ in general), but the exact reverse. Furthermore, as I hope this and the following chapters will demonstrate, ‘death’ in general is not perceived as a movement towards oneness, a common fate awaiting every and each one of us, neither as a mere reflection or transposition of structural social divisions in and of ‘this world’. Death is neither just a collective preoccupation with what happens after life has ended nor how the ‘other world’ (*el mas allá*) might look. All these may exist, but they go hand in hand with another ‘need’, namely, the one which we ask ourselves how the other world, the world of the dead, views ‘our’ world, the world of the living; what does it see and how does it communicate with it? The kinds of death that appear within the Afro-Cuban cosmos are crucially of *muertos* who, in one way or another, communicate with and relate to the living. In other words, it is the oracular aspects of death (or the dead) that are highlighted; death as divination, and in this respect, I agree with Ochoa, it is immanence in general that comes to the fore, and as far as the dead are concerned, a particular kind of immanence (more on this in chapter 5).

The dead in general, are experienced or sensed as more of this world than divinities are; especially when the ones who belong to the anonymous and aimlessly wandering mass become momentarily and fleetingly known through and within the body and its senses. Very often they affect an individual in a bodily fashion and it is always through the senses that their presence is detected. The responsibility to detect and consequently treat them properly—distance them—lies with those ‘gifted’ people who can sense and communicate with them. These people are ones with an initial and almost inherent ‘gift’ to sense *muertos* in general and who might have ‘cultivated’ (*cultivado*) or ‘developed’ (*desarrollado*) it, crucially, by ‘developing’ their relations with their own *muertos*; their ‘affines’. These people are often called *mediums*, *muerteros*, *espiritistas*, and less often, *brujos* (‘witches’ or ‘sorcerers’) or *paleros*. This suggests that people who can sense their own *muertos* can also sense the rest of the *muertos* and other peoples’ *muertos*, be they ‘alien’ or ‘affines’. Furthermore, any kind of *muerto* can only be sensed with more precision, of its

identity and whether it is ‘alien’ or ‘affine’, when it has been ‘attached’, or is trying to do so, to a particular living individual.

As I said before, ‘alien’ *muertos* get ‘attached’ to a person temporarily and by causing some kind of affliction or misfortune. The nature of these afflictions and the way they appear are often described as sudden, coming out of the blue, without any hint of expectation or logical explanation, and also without any clear solution to them. In my previous example of Raul’s migraines, he decided to take the issue to a medium because, as he stressed, he had never experienced them before, he considered himself as healthy and the medicine he took, although strong, did not soothe his migraines. People in similar situations might thus decide to visit a medium, whose first task will be to detect or not the presence of a *muerto*, and more specifically, that *muerto* which might be associated with the issue in question. Mediums then, if they do detect it, will proceed in giving a description of the present *muerto* or, as they say, the ‘frame’ or ‘painting’ (*cuadro*) of it. In the case of it being an ‘alien’ spirit, the description they give is in less detail. The past of such *muertos* as well as their fate are only a matter of concern as long as they indicate a way to avoid them and ‘remove’ them. Rituals of removal involve ‘cleansings’ (*limpiezas*) and ‘breakings’ (*rompimientos*), such as ritual baths and the destruction and disposal of things belonging to the individual, often clothes, which are said to attract the ‘negative energy’ (*energia negativa*) of these *muertos*. This suggests that the ‘attachment’ of these *muertos* is, like clothes, somewhat superficial and not essential to the individual’s being as a whole. Equally, the misfortunes they cause are usually not as serious as causing death for example, provided they are detected and dealt with relatively soon. They can be minor physical ailments, a state of mental unrest or confusion, depression, relatively small accidents or problems in one’s social life. They are, as an *espiritista* once told me, ‘Small obstacles in your path [*pequeños obstaculos en tu camino*]’; and, as ‘small obstacles’ the solutions require small efforts. Yet, it is crucial to get to know the origin of them, because if this is the presence of a *muerto*, then only specific steps can ‘remove’ them.

What is revealed about these *muertos* is first of all their presence. Often they are felt as a negative influence, ‘foreign’ (*ajena*) to the afflicted person. Biographical elements, if at all revealed, are restricted to minor information concerning the

reasons why the *muerto* has been ‘entrapped’ in this world and the place and time it became ‘attached’ to the person. Most of the times what is detected, is just their presence, which is strongly contrasted to that of *muertos* who have been ‘attached’ to the person with the intention of creating a more lasting relation. This last kind of ‘attachment’ is often said to stem from ‘affinity’, something I will explore in the following chapter. What appear to emerge here are two seemingly contradicting characteristics of such *muertos*: firstly, they belong much more to this world than the other, the ‘beyond’. In fact, they do not exactly belong but are ‘entrapped’, alluding to the point that once dead, in a Hertzian sense, a person is expected to undergo a series of transformations and transitions. But not all! Those ‘entrapped’ find themselves in such a condition because they cannot relate intimately with a particular living body (here I include the senses and the person as a whole). As soon as they try to do so, they get linked to the ‘persisting memories’ that permanently haunt them and occasionally are transferred to the living. Thus, what these *muertos* and their memories seem to be are too intense and present. Nevertheless, and we come to the second point, intense and present though they may be, they are not in such a way so as to be able to fully reveal to the living their identities and biographies in detail. The living resist cultivating any kind of profound dialogue; they ‘remove’ them, so that the same ‘persisting memory’ remains ultimately unuttered, uncommunicated, unexplored, and unredeemed. It does not transform into something else and, therefore, cannot be forgotten.

Getting rid of these *muertos* and their ‘frozen’ memories is something that may provoke a certain amount of distress. Martina is a woman around 50 years old and, although she is not actively into *la religión* she has many friends who are and often visits them, as well as rituals, especially the ones which involve contact with the spirits of the dead. She tells me:

When I visited the espiritista [people who are said to be able to communicate with spirits of the dead], as soon as I entered her house, she told me that she could feel a negative influence around me. She gave me an examining look and told me that she could feel my heavy [*pesado*] pace. ‘You are not well, let’s go’, she told me. We then had a seat at her consulting room where she called [*llamó*] her spirit-protector [*espíritu protector*]. It told her that indeed there was a dark spirit of the dead [*muerto oscuro*] which, in its vain search for light [*buscando luz en vano*] had become stuck [*pegado*; the same verb can be translated as ‘attached’] to me. This spirit was provoking all my recent stumblings [*tropiezos*] at work and my sudden feelings of anxiety. The espiritista told me that we should take it off me [*quitarmelo de encima*].

In this account we can see that ‘alien’ *muertos* are sensed, though not fully and immediately. The *espiritista* feels a ‘negative influence’ surrounding Martina’s body and more precisely a ‘heavy’ kind of pace. Considering the fact that the two persons know each other, the *espiritista* immediately senses a difference in Martina’s being and, furthermore, a negative one. This compels her to say, ‘You are not well’, although without a definite reasoning of why this should be the case. But this uncertain conviction, so to speak, leads her to bring the matter to her ‘consulting room’ where her spirit-protector is invoked. It is only then—when the spirit-protector, a *muerto* intimately related to the *espiritista*, gets involved—that more light is thrown on the situation, as indeed such *muertos* as *espíritus protectores* are said to have more ‘light’. The suspicions are confirmed. It was indeed an ‘alien’ *muerto* (or, as it was described, *oscuro*, meaning ‘dark’) whose presence the *espiritista* felt as ‘heavy’ in Martina’s pace and also the reason for her ‘stumblings’ at work and her negative feelings.

If life’s course is a *camino*, this is made ‘heavy’ and prone to ‘stumblings’ by a presence—the *muerto oscuro*—which has been incidentally attracted to and ‘stuck’ on Martina’s body; it had to be ‘taken off’, because it had nothing to do with the most essential part of her *camino*. If however, another kind of *muerto* or entity were to be involved (such as an ‘affine’ *muerto*), the following actions would most probably lead not to a ‘removal’ of it from Martina’s *camino* but a more active and conscious relation with them. In Martina’s case there was little access to, or effort made to obtain more detailed information of the *muerto*’s biography, state of being, wishes, and perspective in general. It was a *muerto oscuro*, looking for light in vain; a hopeless effort which would be perpetuated by the fact that probably, once again, it would be ‘taken off’, as if it were an old piece of clothing, and remain related to nobody. This was in stark contrast with the kind of *muerto* the *espiritista* ‘called’ in order to assist her in sensing this *muerto oscuro*, but also cementing the state of unrelatedness it found itself in. If somebody were to ask her about ‘her’ *muerto* she would be able to give a wealth of information about its identity, biography and ‘function’, the latter possibly being exemplified by the account of Martina’s case.

Another point I wish to make and which I will continue to explore in subsequent parts, is that these kinds of *muertos* are seen as too human. Many frame

this in terms of the memory linked to a *camino* which is abruptly interrupted. They explain that *muertos oscuros* were persons who died an untimely, sudden or violent, death or that, in general, their ‘mission’ (*misión*) in life was not ‘fulfilled’ (*cumplirse*). In essence, their lives were not lived, quantitatively, as long as or, qualitatively, as it should have been. Broken *caminos* as such, when death arrives, are turned into obstacles for other peoples’ *caminos*, where the actions taken by the living are not to amend them but to avoid or get rid of them. Thus, what makes them too human is related to having lived and died unrelated to their true *camino* or without having fulfilled it, and this leads them to ‘live’ a death among humans who constantly avoid them and make them, in such a way, reminded of their entrapment to this world. This is why they ‘wander aimlessly in this world’. They are part of it—they are human in that sense—yet, they are at the same time excluded from it; they are humans with no ‘living’—evolving and transforming—destiny and no one to relate to. They have no present or future, they *are* just past.

Nevertheless, the cases of ‘alien’ *muertos* do not get exhausted in those who have lived an anti-social life or have died an untimely death. The latter might be an exemplary sub-case of the former, but the broad and vague category of ‘alien’ *muertos* embraces a more general aspect and version of death. It was not uncommon, for example, to listen to peoples’ accounts on them as a presence of a spirit of a dead person who had not come to fully realize that it was dead in the first place. Such *muertos* were perceived as persons who continued to act and think as if they were still alive. They would still engage in their former daily habits, frequent and inhabit the places they used to, such as their house. This provoked confusion both to themselves and the living who happened to come across them, especially those who, in one way or another, found themselves in the familiar ‘space’ of the *muerto* ignorant of its condition (for example, by living in the same house the *muerto* used to live and still thought it did). In such cases, ‘alien’ *muertos* were distanced from their familiar environment and the people they affected with the mediation of a medium, who would make an effort to ‘let the *muerto* know’ (*dar conocimiento al muerto*) that it was dead. Yet, ‘affine’ *muertos* could also undergo, through the living, a similar process of realization of their condition as dead. This would normally and most explicitly occur in the early stages of ‘developing’ their relation with their

living ‘affine’, although, and as I will argue in the following chapter, ‘developing’ the ‘affines’ always implies a complex and maybe more subtle process of realization of death.

To know how to act as a ‘proper’ *muerto*, as ‘affines’ seemed to do, more positively at least, is not to be strictly confined to, first, the actual fact of death and, second, a purely cognitive kind of knowledge of the fact, although all these are mutually implicated. To borrow Sussanne Küchler’s evocative depiction of the *malanggan* funerary figurines in New Ireland, Papua New Guinea, as involved in ‘a process of un-stitching of the tightly woven relations of which the deceased person was so much a part’ (Küchler 2002:4-5), and as constitutive of the person who ‘becomes, like an onion, composed of layers [or else, ‘skins’] that are stripped off one by one, as each layer is turned into a *malanggan*-figure, until death’ (2002:50); the knowledge of death within my ethnographic context could also be paralleled and linked to an onion-like, layered process. Nevertheless, its beginning, and not end, is death itself. Schematically put, the first layer is the fact of death and the physical demise of the human body. This is something that all *muertos* share, irrespective of their state and condition, be it ‘alien’, ‘affine’, or what have you. A second layer, where *muertos* start to differentiate among them, involves the knowledge of the first, that is, the ‘hard fact’ of death. ‘Alien’ *muertos* are most likely to be completely ignorant of it, while ‘affines’, although they may initially be ignorant, their position as ‘affines’ grants them the knowledge of it relatively quickly. But most importantly, what differentiates ‘alien’ from ‘affine’ *muertos* is the third layer, which is a much more extended process, consisting of many other layers, and constitutive of the condition of a ‘proper’ *muerto*.

As I will try to show in the following chapter, to act as a ‘proper’ *muerto* involves the activation of the flow of its *camino*, which necessitates an almost strategic intensification of its past condition (biography) so as to overcome and forget it and, hence, proceed to its present condition (‘necrography’; my term) as *muerto*. The following section deals with a very peculiar kind of *muertos*, the *nfumbi*, as these ‘come to life’ within the tradition of *Palo Monte*. Their peculiarity, as I will try to show, resides in that a very specific ‘material’ is manipulated in order to

instantiate them. This, accordingly, creates the quite specific efficacy and perspective of this kind of *muertos*.

***Brujería*: the *muertos*' involvement in human desires**

Within or besides the category of 'alien' *muertos* there are some who appear to have a slightly different fate and they *do* get related to certain individuals in a fuller and more positive sense than the one described so far. This part of the chapter deals with a very particular kind of *muertos*, the *nfumbi*, who have a lot in common with the 'alien' *muertos*. Although it is these 'alien' *muertos* who may most often become *nfumbi* through, as it will be shown, a peculiar kind of manipulation, they also exhibit characteristics similar to those of the 'affines'. Apart from that, they also have their very own, *sui generis* characteristics. Here, there must be made a broad distinction between the most 'private' aspects of relating to *nfumbi* and the more 'public' ones. The first have to do with how the *nfumbi* are directly sensed and thus communicated with, manipulated and involved in the 'works' (*trabajos* or *labores*) of those individuals that cultivate an intimate relation with them, the *paleros* and, by extension, their 'clients'. The second is mostly connected to the instances when the *nfumbi* interact with people who do not have a direct relation with them and, when they come across them in their *camino*, are often perceived of as threat, with ambiguous if not negative effects, or else, as is commonly put, a case of 'witchcraft' (*brujería*). It is in the most 'private' aspects and instances that the *nfumbi* resemble the 'affine' *muertos*, and in the more 'public' ones that they resemble the 'alien'. For example, people, in order to distinguish them from the 'alien'—who are seen as estranged individuals who by their own chaotic and confused agency get 'attached' momentarily to the living—say that the latter are 'sent' (*enviados*) (see James Figarola 2006a:116). They are still described as 'dark', 'attached to matter', and so forth, but the fact that they are 'sent' denotes that they are sent by somebody and it is this somebody that, firstly, is related to the *muerto* and, secondly, to whom the blame is ultimately put. Thus, on a sociological level, these *muertos* are an essential material with which purely human relations and more specifically, as we shall soon see, desires are instantiated. This phenomenon has been commonly termed

ethnographically as ‘witchcraft’ or ‘sorcery’ (see Evans-Pritchard 1990; Marwick 1986; Parrinder 1963) and in Cuba is known as *brujería*.

In instances of *brujería* the possibility of some misfortune being extremely serious, even life threatening, is much higher. One’s *camino* could be met with more than just ‘obstacles’ that make you ‘stumble’, or get turned upside down. One, as it is often said, could be ‘knocked down’ (*tumbar*).¹² It is interesting, I think, that the idiom of *brujería* comes to combine two distinct sources of misfortune, the degree of which, when just stemming from either one or the other, is relatively less. One is the case of the ‘alien’ *muertos* we just touched upon; the other is among living humans. There is a widespread notion, which usually does not undergo deep elaboration but is loosely accepted as such, that the mere ill or positive intentions of one person towards another may reach, so to speak, the latter and affect him or her accordingly. As with the first source of misfortunes, this one is not very likely thought to be extremely powerful. They are misfortunes that do not mark deeply peoples’ lives. They are part of the everyday and they are usually lost in oblivion until they make once more their appearance. Yet, when these two are combined, the cocktail they produce is seen as extremely strong, with potential fatal results. This was the most common face of what people meant when they referred to *brujería* or *magia negra* (‘black magic’): a living person and a dead one working together against somebody else.

This kind of interaction is most commonly concentrated in an already relatively established system of beliefs and practices that is known as *Palo Monte* or *Regla Conga*.¹³ *Palo*, as with *Espiritismo*, puts a great emphasis on the role of the dead and their interaction with the living, but with very particular kinds of the dead and in a very particular way. Being imbued by a dark aura, *Palo* and its practitioners display a high degree of secrecy, not only creating a clear distinction between initiated and non-initiated, but also among the initiated themselves. I frequently found during fieldwork that a very many people were not keen to admit that they had

¹² In popular Cuban-Spanish, *tumbar* can metaphorically denote to win over or defeat, often cunningly or decisively; to take control of something or somebody, and, especially in cases of *brujería*, to kill. Interestingly, *tumba* in Spanish means grave.

¹³ For extensive accounts on *Palo Monte*, see Bolívar Aróstegui and González Díaz de Villegas 1998; Cabrera 1986, 1993; Fuentes Guerra and Gómez 2004:1-38; Garoutte and Wambaugh 2007:67-83; James Figarola 2006a, 2006b; Ochoa 2010b; Palmié 2002:159-200.

undergone any kind of *Palo* initiation—especially initiations that conferred an active role. It was only upon developing a closer relationship with them or hearing about it through a third party that I would learn of their involvement. Furthermore, those who did admit to being involved, would be very cautious of what knowledge they would reveal and would stress that they, unlike others, did not conduct ‘black magic’; the popular image for *Palo* and its adepts, the *paleros* and their all important ritual object the *nganga*.

Palo, and the ‘works’ its adepts engage with through the *ngangas* and the *nfumbi*, has a very strong public image, which usually highlights its moral ambiguity, even immorality, primitivity, fetishism, ill intentions fulfilled by mystical means, introversion and secrecy (see, for example, James Figarola 2006a:103; Ochoa 2007:477-479, 2010a:389; Ortiz 2001; Palmié 2002:159-200, 2006; Wedel 2004:53-64). Such a generally negative public image is a really complex phenomenon with broad socio-historical origins and implications. To an extent, other traditions, such as *Ocha/Ifá* and even *Espiritismo* (especially its most popular version; see the following chapter), have also been charged with a similar image, yet, *Palo* seems to have become the exemplary negative model of it in public discourse. This is especially true when the discourse takes into account the differences among them and does not just indiscriminately merge them into an amorphous, unitary whole. The socio-historical origins and implications of such a discourse have to do, I believe, with what is socially constructed as an ‘African’ essence, something which can be evinced as pertaining to various aspects of ‘cultural expression’, such as manners of speaking, body-language, sexuality, values and morals, and even intelligence and rationality. Considering all of this, *Palo* often becomes the African ‘heart of darkness’ (Brown 2003a:3) *par excellence* on Cuban soil, even for *religiosos* of other traditions, but also of *Palo* itself. It is not uncommon for a *palero* to verbalize things reminiscent of what ‘outsiders’ might also identify with *Palo*, such as, ‘Palo is dark’ (*Palo es oscuro*), ‘Palo is evil’ (*Palo es malo*), ‘Palo is for harming’ (*Palo hace daño*), ‘Palo is very material’ (*Palo es muy material*), and so on. *Paleros* will not necessarily object to being referred to as *brujos* (‘sorcerers’) or that their ‘works’ mainly involve *brujería*. At the same time, and this is what *paleros* unlike the ‘outsiders’ are keen not only to admit to but may poignantly stress, *Palo* has a

reputedly incomparable efficacy to ‘work fast’ (*trabaja rapido*), ‘fuck up your enemies’ (*chingar tus enemigos*) and satisfy the darkest and most secret desires—desires which, as some of the *paleros* I met claimed, somewhat ironically, all humans have but are not ready to openly admit. Thus, as with every ‘heart of darkness’, the image for *Palo* is an openly negative one but also accompanied by a latent kind of attraction (see Palmié 2002:37-38, 260-289).

Engaging with these kinds of discourses can be fascinating and may offer a very astute sociological edge. Nevertheless, the path I have chosen to follow is different and possibly revealing of aspects which can be suppressed and thus misread when the focus becomes the otherwise interesting discourses. In my effort to approach the ‘insiders’ point of view’, I find it equally rewarding to engage not only with the stereotypes but also with a ‘thicker’ description (Geertz 1973:3-30) of what points of views are adopted through *Palo*, rather than about it. Here I am interested in the various ways the *nfumbi* come to adopt a point of view and interact with the living, which is also inseparable from what the living do and see through the *nfumbi*. Put differently, instead of focusing on the perspectives *about Palo*, the *nfumbi* and those who interact with them, I rather venture for an account on the perspectives that are generated *from* and *through* them. This, I believe, affords us an engagement, not only with *Palo* representations and discourses, but also with what *Palo* instantiates, suspending, in that way, the academic urge and impatience to ascribe to it—*Palo*—a symbolic function.

Almost three months have passed since I arrived in Cuba and I still have not been able to see the famous or infamous, for many, *nganga*. But today my ethnographic luck is about to change as I will be meeting an old *palero* somewhere on the outskirts of Havana. The aura of mystery that surrounds *Palo*, which is full of stories of extraordinary events, accusations of *brujería*, dark spirits, and exhumed bodies, make my curiosity and excitement even greater. It takes me almost an hour by bus to reach Armando’s neighbourhood, where tropical vegetation coexists equally with one or two storied small houses, the majority of which look like a home-made *pastiche* of concrete, metal and wood, with fading colours. I enter the front yard of a wooden hut with a tall and slender palm tree in the middle. Two small flea-infested dogs announce my arrival as the half-hinged door opens. ‘Welcome to

my house' Armando exclaims, and he lets me in. Despite the fact that I have already spent three months in Cuba and visited quite a lot of houses, most of them poorly decorated and furnished, Armando's house is surprisingly poor and simple. The floor is of the same earth that existed before the house was built, only now, after so much use, far more solid and dark. Some worm-eaten rugs cover parts of the three-in-one lounge/living/bed room, poorly furnished with only a couple of old chairs, a table and his bed. All over there are piles of things, all of them looking old and dusty: books, papers, sticks, toys, cigars, bottles, chains, wooden frames, and photographs. At some point, after a long chat Armando tells me: 'So, would you like to see my *nganga*?' I anxiously reply, 'Yes' and we proceed to the back of the house. Another door leads us to the backyard.

In the backyard there is a small wooden hut with no windows. We enter the dark room, the only light from two candles. There are two stools where we sit. As my eyes get used to the darkness I can discern a huge metal cauldron in the middle of one of the hut's walls. The image is mysterious and almost scary, as there are a variety of objects contained in the cauldron. There seem to me to be quite arbitrary: there are 'sticks' (*palos*) coming out of it, feathers, a dead black bird, metallic objects and an amorphous mass of other materials which I cannot fathom. 'This is my *nganga*', Armando exclaims. The collection of these objects along with the cauldron, have a dark colour which enhances the image of one object rather than a multiplicity. As I come to know through time, this particular dark colour is the outcome of blood sacrifices, herbs and alcohol—as offerings to the spirits that reside in the *nganga*—, dust, rustiness, dirt and dampness, due to the fact that normally the *ngangas* are kept in secure, dark places, ideally out of the house. Next to the *nganga*, there is also a variety of objects that lie on the floor. Smaller *ngangas*, which I come to know belong to some of Armando's *ahijados* ('godchildren'), a collection of sticks, bottles of alcohol mixed with spices and herbs, cigars, and geometrical chalk drawings on the floor and the walls. 'This is my laboratory; this is where all the serious work is done', Armando adds. As it is my first real-life experience of a *nganga*, I probe Armando to explain its role in the *Palo* practice, and also a bit about his biography and that of his *nganga*.

Armando got *rayado* (initiated by way of incisions on the body) in *Palo* when he was 14 years of age, after suffering an ‘almost deadly health issue.’ He was immediately sent to the hospital where the doctors were unable to detect or cure what was going on. After a week of extreme pain, vomiting and a ‘state of trance’, Armando’s family decided to seek the help of *la religión*. They sought the help of an experienced and well-known *palero* who was a neighbour of theirs. So as not to raise suspicions in the hospital, the bulk of the ceremonies were conducted in the house of the *palero* and the gardens of the hospital. Although things appeared to slightly improve, after a couple of days, Armando’s state deteriorated again. The *palero* informed the family that his problem had nothing to do with medicine and the doctors, but with *brujería*. But the *brujería* was so ‘strong’ (*fuerte*), presumably the work of another *palero* who had been contracted by an enemy family, that Armando would need to leave the hospital immediately and be initiated in *Palo* himself. They had to literally smuggle Armando out of the hospital in the night, with the help of some doctors and security guards ‘understanding of these things.’

He was hurriedly brought to the *palero*’s house in an unconscious state. Armando remembers fuzzy images and sounds, amidst his trance-like ‘struggle between life and death’, being laid on the floor of a dark room, people chanting around him, animals screaming and ‘strange smells and tastes’, namely, the ritual beverages the initiate is given, including sacrificial blood. After this indefinite, semi-conscious and nightmarish experience Armando woke up ‘one fine morning’ from his lethargy. He was alone in the dark room, with only the light of some candles, similar to the room we were now in. He stood up and opened the door. The sunlight almost blinded him. He entered the unknown house where he finally saw some familiar faces. When his mother saw him, ‘risen from the dead’, she let a cry of terror and joy. ‘Welcome back’, his recently made *padrino* told him.

After this experience Armando was fully initiated in *Palo* by being *rayado* for a second time and obtaining his own *nganga*, alternatively called *prenda* or *fundamento*.¹⁴ For Armando, as for the rest of the *paleros*, the *nganga* consists of a miniature of the whole universe (see Bolívar Aróstegui and González Díaz de

¹⁴ For descriptions in *Palo* initiation, see Bettelheim 2001:40-43; Bolívar Aróstegui and González Díaz de Villegas 1998:41-43; Cabrera 1986:160-170; Fuentes Guerra and Gómez 2004:22-24; James Figarola 2006a:71-80, 2006b:217-223, 246-249; Ochoa 2010b:111-128.

Villegas 1998:15; Cabrera 1993:132; James Figarola 2006a). Elements of nature, such as sticks, dead animals, plants, are all material manifestations of spirits that have specific powers which are activated through these elements. For example, the ‘sticks’ (*palos*) bring into the *nganga* the great force that is inherent in the forest, ‘the wilderness’ (*el monte*). The dead animals give the *nganga* and its owner their specific capacities, like seeing from a long distance (birds), or the accentuated olfactory ability (dogs), for example. Stones (*matarí*), as in *Ocha/Ifá*, are manifestations of spirits of nature called *mpungos* (for a more detailed description of a *nganga*’s contents, see Cabrera 1986:126-127, 1993:119-146; James Figarola 2006a, 2006b; Ochoa 2010b:140-148).

But what makes the *nganga* an even more mysterious, ‘dark’, and extremely efficacious object is the *muerto* that is said to reside in it. Each *nganga* is meant to contain at least one spirit of a dead person. This *muerto*, unlike other *muertos*, is not related to the *nganga* and its owner by way of affinity or kinship. It is a contracted *muerto* that resides and ‘labours’ (*trabaja*) with the *palero* through a ‘pact’ (*pacto*) and it is very often called *nfumbi* or *nfumbe*.¹⁵ The ‘material’ (*lo material*) in *Palo* is most dramatically displayed by this kind of pact, as the *muerto* is not brought into the *nganga* by just immaterial means or objects that the *muerto* biographically identifies itself with. The *muerto* is in the *nganga* in a much more literal sense. There are parts of its remains, bones and, sometimes, even its skull in it. The pact is then initiated in a place that the majority of the people view as that where the dead acquire peace, material detachment and respectful remembrance by the living: the cemetery. The *muertos* that are brought from there to the *nganga* are nevertheless not so much resting in peace. They are spirits of people who have been forgotten by society, whilst in life were on the margins of it, and who may have died a violent and sudden death. Many of them were criminals or the victims of them, alcoholics, drug-addicts, and mad people (see Cabrera 1993:126; James Figarola 2006b:37). These spirits are considered to be unable to detach themselves from this world and they make ideal candidates for acquiring a more active role in it through the pact with the *palero*. In

¹⁵ For the centrality of the *nganga*, its *muerto* and its ‘pact’ with the *palero*, see Bolívar Aróstegui and González Díaz de Villegas 1998:15, 39-45, 61; Cabrera 1986:125, 1993:22, 122-123; Fernández Martínez 2005:64; Fuentes Guerra and Gómez 2004:21; Garoutte and Wambaugh 2007:68-69; James Figarola 2006b:31-48; Ochoa 2010b:158-165; Palmié 2002:159-200, 2006:862-864; Wedel 2004:54.

essence, these spirits are drawn from the ‘aimlessly wandering’ and ‘anonymous sea’ (see Ochoa 2007) or mass of the dead previously discussed.

It is not a straightforward thing to do, obtaining a *muerto* from the cemetery in order to make the ‘labour pact’ and ritually making it a resident of the *nganga*. To begin with, it is an illicit activity to steal human remains. As said before, the ideal candidates for *nfumbi*-ship are bodies of somewhat liminal people. This means that, normally, these people do not have any living persons to attend to them in the first place. Acquiring the human remains of the *nfumbi* initiates the ever strong and very particular bond the *paleros* will cultivate with his *nfumbi*. In a way, the liminality of the dead is passed on to the living in their very first meeting, since the *paleros* will have to acquire him illicitly. Armando, like the rest of the *paleros*, acquired his *muerto-nfumbi* under the darkness of night. He had previously made arrangements with the night guard of the cemetery and had obtained his ‘licence’ to do his job without interference. The guard’s role is even more complicated and interesting, as he is not only the gatekeeper of very important ritual ‘stuff’ for the *paleros*, but he is usually the one who has some knowledge of the identities of the cemetery’s *muertos*. He is the one who knows which of them do not receive visits from the living, may know some information about the dead while in life, and generally, through a long interaction with *paleros*, has a very good idea of possibly eligible *nfumbi* candidates (see also Cabrera 1993:132-133, Ochoa 2010b:161-163).

As soon as the *paleros* has gained access and some knowledge of particular *muertos*, the next step is to ask the *muertos* themselves. It is very hard to know exactly how this is done, as usually the whole event takes place in the complete absence of witnesses. This is not only because the action is an illicit one, but also, and most importantly for the *paleros*, because the *nfumbi* will come to take a leading role in the whole function of the *nganga* and, therefore, knowledge by others of its name and way of acquisition could be potentially used against the *paleros* himself. Armando, then, went alone to the cemetery and he was not very keen on revealing the exact procedure. What he did tell me was that he first went to a very ‘simple and poor’ grave where there was no marble covering it. He started chanting in low voice (probably in the ritual language of *Palo* which is a mixture of Spanish and Bantu words) and asked the dead if he was willing to enter the pact. Armando tells me he

used an oracle without being specific as to which one. I assume it could be a relatively simple one where one obtains ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answers. This particular *muerto* was reluctant to enter the pact, so Armando proceeded with his search at the ‘common grave’ (*fosa común*). There rest a mass of bodies which are invariably not claimed, no living people attend them or simply there is no money to afford an individual grave. In this anonymous mass of bodies *paleros* often find their *nfumbi*. Armando too found his there. Since then, Armando’s *nfumbi* has resided in his *nganga*, the identity of which, through the passage of time, has unfolded in an interaction of ‘jobs’. He tells me:

He [the *nfumbi*] is a very powerful *muerto*. Once you give him the order to act, he is unleashed [*se suelta*] and even I find it difficult to control him and convince him to stay calm inside the *nganga*. That is why I only use him in extremely urgent situations, mainly when there is a big combat [*guerra*] going on [alluding to issues of *brujería*, usually against other *paleros* and their *nfumbis*] and why I give him offerings periodically, so that he is kept fed and knows who his master is...I often communicate with him so that we both make clear our needs to each other. He asks me for things to complement the *nganga*, so that it always stays active and strong [*fortalecida*]. For example, three days ago, he asked me to go to the forest [*el monte*] and find him a special stick [*palo*], so that he can work more efficiently [...] I remember once, when I was personally attacked by another *palero*, my *nfumbi* had gone mad. Several days had passed and it seemed to me that he had disappeared, then I felt his presence and ran off to the *nganga*. I felt his exhaustion in my body and head; there was hardly any energy left in him. I knew he had to be fed immediately. Normally, in such situations I sacrifice a four-legged animal, which is the most powerful food [*comida*] one can give. But it was late in the night and there was no way I could find an animal at that time. Besides, I couldn’t afford it. I had some small chickens in the backyard, but I knew that for my tired and hungry *nfumbi* their blood would only serve as an appetizer, so what I did was to cut open my self and offered him my very own blood. Just a few drops and he was new again, ready to fight. Since then, I have never fed him with my blood because as he is a very material entity, he can get used to it and even addicted and that would drain me off and make him a vampire, crazy and totally uncontrollable, unable to distinguish between me and him, this world and the other.

Trying to move away from the general and often stereotypical image of *Palo* and rather than treating it as a tradition from the outset, I delve into the instances of interaction between the *nfumbi* and the living. As I mentioned before, a broad distinction can be made between those who come across a *nfumbi* temporarily and those who relate to it in a more permanent way. As the *nfumbi* are *muertos* which are very commonly perceived as ‘sent’ (*enviados*), the above distinction could be framed in terms of those who ‘send’ it and those to whom it is ‘sent’. The person who ‘sends’ a *nfumbi* is essentially the *palero*, but it can either be because of his own personal reasons and wishes or of those who have come to seek his help. *Paleros* stress that the *nfumbi* are a very particular kind of *muerto* by saying, for instance, that

they are very ‘material’ and they ‘work (a lot) with the material.’ *Nfumbi* are *muertos* who initially—before becoming one—find themselves in a highly ‘material’ state and, consequently—by becoming one—their ‘materiality’ is accentuated even more. Their initial state is one of a profound lack of relatedness. *Nfumbi*, unlike ‘affines’, do not ‘belong’ to any living person; they are also perceived as ‘aimlessly wandering’ spirits, in a state of confusion, characteristics which suggest that they are initially (no more different than) ‘alien’ *muertos*. Armando’s acquisition of his *nfumbi* from the common grave, where an undifferentiated mass of bones lay, is just a more ‘material’ dimension of the anonymous sociality ‘alien’ *muertos* find themselves in.

The ontological affinity between ‘alien’ *muertos* and *nfumbi* is highlighted by the account of another *palero*, Yosdado, when he described how he found his own *nfumbi*. Yosdado, as it happens with many *paleros*, even before his initiation in *Palo*, had an ‘innate’ (*inata*) ability to sense *muertos*. Around the period of his initiation in *Palo*, he perceived the presence of a *muerto* which did not ‘belong’ to him. As he described it, the *muerto* got ‘attached’ to him ‘in despair’ (*en desesperación*) without being able to articulate itself as to what it wanted, or where it was coming from. In other words, it could not reveal aspects of its biography, or any significant oracular messages. Yosdado normally, in such cases of ‘barren attachments’ (*apegos estériles*), as he interestingly called them, would send the ‘alien’ *muerto* off, ‘To where it came from; to hell [*de donde vino; al carajo*].’ Nevertheless, as he had recently been initiated with his second *rayamiento* in *Palo* and had already obtained his own *nganga*, he was looking for a *muerto* to ‘fully activate it’ (*activarla completamente*) and ‘strengthen it’ (*fortalecerla*). He, thus, decided not to send the *muerto* ‘to hell’, but to try and lure, convince it to become the ‘dog of the prenda’ (*perro de prenda*; as alternatively *nfumbi* and *nganga* may be called respectively). In order to do so, Yosdado told me that he started ‘conversing’ (*conversar*) with the *muerto*. As in the case of Armando, he avoided being explicit about what this ‘conversation’ involved, and just said that the *muerto* ‘gave its consent and license [*dió su consentimiento y licencia*].’ and agreed to enter the ‘pact’ to become his *nfumbi*.

I never came across a similar account as that of Yosdado, nevertheless, its uniqueness exemplifies the initial ‘alien-ness’ of all *nfumbi*. Normally, the *muerto* does not come to the *palero* but the *palero* goes in search of his *nfumbi*. The search is thus most often initiated by the living and in places where ‘alien’ *muertos* are attached to or frequent, such as the cemetery and in particular where their human remains are buried. In Yosdado’s case, he was initially found by the *muerto*, in a way that normally ‘alien’ and ‘affines’ behave. Even if this is so, he had to actively make an effort to convince and transform it into a *nfumbi* by ‘conversing’ with it and not sending it away. As soon as the ‘pact’ was made, one of the *nfumbi*’s first significant revelations was to lead him to where its remains were. This was also the first instance when Yosdado acquired knowledge of some of its biography. On the second night after the ‘pact’, Yosdado had a very intense and strange dream. Although the following morning he could not remember very clearly what exactly the dream ‘presented’ (*presentó*) him with, he woke up with a pressing ‘urge’ (*deseo*) to visit the most western province of Pinar del Rio. The urge was at the same time vague—not knowing exactly why and where in the whole province to go—and intense, as the (recollection of the) dream itself was. Equally vaguely but intensely, he felt that the urge and the dream had to do with his *nfumbi* or, as he said, that they—the urge and dream—were simultaneously the *nfumbi*’s. He immediately decided to embark on his journey to Pinar del Rio the very same day.

Unfortunately, due to a lack of space and literary skill, I shall have to skip the otherwise fascinating and detailed account of Yosdado’s journey, which as he was recounting it, I could not help but feel as if I was immersed in a novel. Surrealistic as it may have sounded to me, always with a latent and instinctive suspicion towards Yosdado’s faithful account of the ‘actual’ events, for him the excitement and enchantment looked far greater than mine, not because he considered the events as being mundane and highly predictable, but precisely because they were not and therefore were enchant-*ing* (and not enchant-*ed*), as they unravelled in his very journey.

To unwillingly and forcibly make a long story short, Yosdado’s journey, full of spontaneous and incredible, according to him, incidents, led him to a remote area somewhere relatively near the picturesque village of Viñales. The whole journey, not

being straightforward in its purpose and destination, was described to me as a series of subtly interconnected events, full of ‘signs’ (*señales*) and unexpected encounters, which finally led an exhausted, hungry and filthy, yet unusually alert Yosdado, ‘In the middle of some woods far from civilization.’ There, under a tree, and for the first time so explicitly, he sensed the presence of his *nfumbi*, which instructed him to dig at a very specific point. He started doing so using his own hands. After an hour or so, full of sweat and dirt, he came across what he increasingly suspected what his *nganga* and *muerto-as-nfumbi* was missing: its human remains. Yosdado put them in his backpack and made his way back to Havana. The whole journey lasted five days and on the night of the fifth he arrived home and immediately ‘sealed the pact’ (*cerré el pacto*) by inserting the bones and skull into their new ‘skin’, so to speak, the *nganga*.

Yosdado pointed out that it was after all of the aforementioned events that he began to have a more intimate relation with his *nfumbi*, more importantly an increase, both quantitatively and qualitatively, of communication and efficacy. He would sense the *nfumbi* less vaguely and more viscerally and could enter into a more intelligible kind of dialogue with it. For instance, biographical information about the *nfumbi* was communicated to him. He learned that the *muerto* had been a *mambí*,¹⁶ that he was a young, unmarried man, born in Asturias of Spain, where he had freshly arrived from, leaving behind his parents and brothers. Not long after arriving in Cuba, he had soon been inspired by the Cuban cause for independence. He died from a Spanish bullet during an ambush and his comrades only managed to hurriedly bury him seven days after his death. Yosdado added in awe that it was also seven days that it took him and the *nfumbi* to get to the remains and bring them to the *nganga*—considering the fact that the dream ‘presented’ itself on the second night of the ‘pact’ and the journey lasted five more days.

Nfumbi seem to be drawn from the generic reservoir of ‘alien’ *muertos* and, whereas the majority of the people actively try to avoid them by sending them off, some individuals choose to actively engage with them. In a sense, both kinds of *muertos* seem to be highly affected by human agency, be that an act of expiation—for the ‘alien’—or appropriation—for the *nfumbi*. To appropriate what is

¹⁶ This is the Cuban word for a rebel fighting for the independence of Cuba against the Spanish Crown at the turn of the 19th century.

normally expiated also suggests that the kinds of *muertos* we are dealing with do not necessarily have rigid ontological boundaries but are dependent, to an extent, on the relations that are cultivated among them and the living. For instance, as we saw in Yosdado's case, an initially 'alien' *muerto* became a *nfumbi*. Theoretically at least and as it was suggested to me by various individuals, 'alien' *muertos* may also become 'affines', if, or as soon as they find the 'right' person to get 'attached' to and the person grants them 'acknowledgement'.

Yet, this is not a one way flow, where the living humans mould the kinds of *muertos* they wish to have. The latter find themselves in a state which can be sensed by mediums not as strictly fixed but as indicative of the *muertos*' potentials. It is here that human agency, in dependence of what kind of 'materialization' will be adopted, makes use or not of these potentials and therefore plays an important role in giving them shape and bringing them into existence by, at the same time, using them—the perceived potentials—as 'maps' of the possible 'paths' that can be taken. What I mean by human agency is not to be conflated with just a relatively high degree of human freedom to create 'things' (be they objects, spirits or both) out of nothing. Usually, this kind of understanding tends to view human agency as a property of humanity that may oscillate between a positive dimension such as creativity and resistance, and a more negative one, such as fetishism or animism (see chapter 6); as human fancy. In the background lies what is taken to be 'human' and what is not, and, by extension, what has agency and what does not. Therefore, in this sense, agency may or can be 'given' to it. This is ultimately a constructivist model which imposes its own definition of what is 'human' and what is not and when 'others' do not perceive the same, then they must be ultimately mistaken no matter how real the 'social' or 'cultural' realities produced are (as was the case with Evans-Pritchard).

Human agency, through the ethnography of 'alien' *muertos* and the *nfumbi*, is not limited to what 'we' define as human (a living person) and freedom (to create the other-than human). To be too human and too free (as a human) when dead, is posed as a limit or obstacle. 'Alien' *muertos* are perceived as persons who do not have potentials to relate because the degree of identification with their past embodied biographies is too intense. Having lost their human body once and for all, they seem to be unaware of it. Thus, they cannot transmit their perspectives to the living,

neither of their biography nor of them because they have not ‘othered’ themselves enough. ‘Alien’ *muertos* conflate their ‘necrography’ (present state; my term) with their biography (past state) and, thus, cannot communicate and ‘properly’ relate to the living, because they themselves act and think as ones. ‘Alien’ *muertos* are perceived as ones who do not have the potential to relate, first, with their new condition as dead and, second, to the living, but this does not mean that they cannot relate in absolute terms. As with having a potential does not necessarily mean that it comes to be realized, not having one does not necessarily mean that, under specific conditions, it cannot be realized. This is the case with the *nfumbi*, as although initially being in a state of un-relatedness and are thus ‘alien’, they do enter into a kind of relation by becoming the *nfumbi* of a *palero*.

Palero and *nfumbi* enter into a kind of relation that, in many respects, resembles that with the ‘affines’. The *palero* gets to know biographical aspects of the *nfumbi* while in life, as people do with their ‘affines’, but not in so much depth and detail. The majority of the *paleros* I met tended to place them in a secondary position and, when they mentioned them, they mostly revolved around aspects which had to do with a chain of events that led the person to become an ‘alien’ *muerto*. In Yosdado’s account, what was highlighted about his *nfumbi* while in life was, firstly, that he suffered an untimely death (as he died young and by a bullet in an ambush) and, secondly, that his life, death and burial occurred in a sort of strange and lonely environment (he had recently left his family back in Spain, was unmarried, and died and got buried hurriedly in the woods, after seven days of decomposition). As we shall see, with the ‘affines’ there is a much bigger wealth of knowledge about their biographies and people actively pursue them as this is accompanied by an increase in the flow of perspectives, not only about the *muertos*’ past life (biography), but also their wishes of the present (‘necrography’) and their viewpoints about the living themselves; especially those to whom the *muertos* get ‘attached’ and who become their ‘affines’.

The *nfumbi*, in that respect, are more akin to ‘alien’ *muertos*. Although the *palero* through his *nfumbi* claims to be able to ‘see’ events and get to know about things otherwise unseen and unknowable, they tend to be extremely specific. As long as ‘alien’ *muertos* are perceived as such, the instances of encounters with them and

the living are extremely short and limited and, usually, they are characterized by their negative and alienating effects. In the broader scheme of things that constitute one's *camino* in life, these encounters are specific points that do not refer to it as a continuous and reciprocal journey, but as a deviation from it, which has to be amended and realigned 'on the spot'. As much as 'alien' *muertos* are perceived as persons who seriously deviated from their own *camino*, both while in life (in their biography) and as *muertos* (in their necrography), their relations to the living gravitate towards a similar kind of effect, that is, a kind of deviation concerning the living as well. 'Alien' *muertos* do not 'belong' to the living and, thus, the encounters with them also do not belong to their *camino*; they are external—'alien'—to it, not internal—and 'affine'. *Nfumbi*, when they affect people other than its own *palero* are also commonly done so as 'alien' *muertos*; and their affects are often perceived as those of the 'alien', although even more so exaggerated. The people to whom the *nfumbi* are 'sent' may suffer misfortunes that can potentially be very dangerous and harming, broadly referred to as *brujería*. Unlike 'alien' *muertos* who might get 'attached' to the living almost accidentally because of their confused and chaotic state (one that does not let them know if and to whom they belong), the *nfumbi* do so intentionally. Ultimately, the intention is not thought as directly or solely belonging to the *nfumbi* but to the person to whom it belongs—the *palero*—and it is in this sense that in the relations between *nfumbi* and the living it is human agency that prevails.

This peculiar identification between *nfumbi* and *palero* and their consequent intense relation can also create a peculiar way with which they can be 'sensed' by others. For example, Armando tells me that the way he perceives the *nfumbi* of other *paleros* is that he feels the presence of a *muerto oscuro* followed by another presence, that of 'a real person', as he tells me, 'of somebody with a name and an address.' After further, often oracular, investigations this person is traced—meaning that more details are sought especially as to the context of this person's ill intentions—and it is to him or her that the *muerto oscuro* is 'sent back' (*virar*). In an almost identical fashion, as with aimlessly wandering 'alien' *muertos*, their absence of biography is sensed, but to that is added a parallel 'sense' of another human presence with a biography. The accentuated humanity of the *nfumbi*, dramatically

brought into existence by its own remains, is ‘sensed’ as a double presence, one that makes it an ‘alien’ *muerto* without a biography and another that makes it an ‘alien’ *muerto* related to somebody—a *nfumbi*. This is an example of how a *nfumbi* might be experienced. Other accounts I have collected about ‘sensing’ the *nfumbi* by *espiritistas* and *paleros* were similar. For instance, another account described that the *nfumbi* was ‘sensed’ as a *muerto oscuro* but with an intensified feeling of its presence: ‘As if it was a real person. It gave me such a chill that I thought that I would literally freeze’, my friend told me.

What I think is highlighted here is an intensification of humanity that the *nfumbi* possesses; their very materiality. Their bones and skulls are materials with which these spirits are said to be attached to this world. The act of unearthing them is crucial exactly because their very essence as particular kind of spirit resides or is in these remains. The *muerto* is thought to be lured into entering into the contractual relation with the *palero* because the *palero* explicitly acquires something the *muerto* still identifies itself with. Its remains constitute the stuff with which the *muerto* recognizes itself as ‘human’.

Moving from those people to whom the *nfumbi* is ‘sent’ to those who ‘send’ it, the *nfumbi* acquire aspects that resemble those of ‘affine’ *muertos*. As we have seen, biographical aspects, although they may be limited, do come out to light; *nfumbi* can also reveal to the *palero* concerns of his interest or of his ‘clients’ and *ahijados*. But still these concerns make their appearance more spontaneously and they are only envisioned as part of one’s *camino* in a *post facto* fashion, as an accumulation of events that can be recollected without necessarily revealing a broader pattern of a destiny from which one may deviate from or realign to (as we shall see in the case of ‘affine’ *muertos* and especially of deities like the *orichas*). This lack of commitment to a broader scheme of things is what many *paleros* emphasize in their interaction with their *nfumbi*. This is their commitment: committed uncommitment, so to speak.

As long as the former keep the latter ‘fed’ through offerings and sacrifices they have a relative degree of freedom to conduct the ‘works’ they desire. *Nfumbi* reveal to their *paleros* cases where *nfumbi* of other *paleros* have interfered and negatively affect them or their clients, that is, cases of *brujería contra brujería*. Not

committing to a broader scheme of things is not to be seen only in negative terms. The *nfumbi* may be hard to perceive in terms of a general *camino*, but it is exactly because of this and its excessive attachment to the world of the living, that it can perceive the details that cannot be seen by a more general perspective. It can also be highly indifferent to and, thus free from, a commitment to a destiny, allowing it to be more spontaneous in fulfilling the desires of humans. It is in other words liberating as well. *Brujería*, in this sense, is not only a defence system against an attack—another *brujería*—but also a complex and often experimental manipulation of ‘things’ in order to achieve other ends and desires, such as healing, positive results in the amorous and sexual life, and professional aspirations, for example. In essence, *paleros*, *nfumbi*, *ngangas* and the ‘works’ they all inextricably get involved in, are directed towards these desires which spontaneously appear in the everyday, without creating long-lasting obligations, commitments and exchanges; and this is simultaneously its limit—because they do not engage with a broader viewpoint of one’s *camino*—as well as its liberating effect; in other words, its very peculiar efficacy. As we shall see in the following chapter, ‘affine’ *muertos* also preserve this aspect of spontaneity but they also cultivate a more reciprocal, and broader in perspective, kind of exchange.

CHAPTER 3

SENSING THE DEAD the perspectives of ‘affine’ *mueritos*

During the time I spent in Havana, my curiosity was drawn by an unfamiliar to me tendency of many people to transmit information that was often deemed as impossible to be known by any conventional means. People would be keen to tell you aspects of your character that transgressed the expected passage of time in which a relative familiarization could have taken place. Even more surprisingly, one can receive information, not only about character traits, but also about past, present and future events and situations of a more tangible nature. For instance, I was often witness or told of cases where somebody was informed by an individual—even by a complete stranger—of a physical ailment, an imminent accident, particular likes and dislikes, relations with other people, even a factual description of spaces and objects the person might be intimately and knowingly related to. Such instances, imbued with an aura of wondrous revelations and prophecies, especially when they come from strangers, become stories worthy of recounting in the everyday lives of *habaneros* (people from Havana), not so much because they are deemed as mundane, but exactly because they possess this wondrous and revelatory quality that transforms the triviality of the everyday into an indigenous experience and idiom of the ‘exotic’ and the ‘alter’. Indeed, more than often, many Cubans, even those actively involved in *la religión*, would remember their initial surprise when they were first met with such incidents, especially those that rang the bell of truth according to them.

Similar phenomena are not completely strange to a Western context. For instance, my mother has told me that when she was approximately 15 years old, she woke up in the middle of the night with a very intense feeling (probably accompanied by a nightmare; she is not sure) that something bad had happened to her older brother. She was extremely upset, convinced that this was not just a bad dream and with the need to communicate her fear. Her brother was indeed unusually late home, a fact which had kept my grandmother awake. Some time later the phone rang. My uncle had been involved in a car accident and had been taken to the

hospital. Another account, again given by my mother, was about a friend of hers who died dramatically, falling down the stairs of her house. At the funeral, her sister said that three nights before the accident my mother's friend dreamt of their deceased father appearing with a black horse and telling her that he had come for her and that soon they would be together. These 'strange' cases although individually might be intense, in general they float, so to speak, in the consciousness of many of us, without us pursuing the matter more and even almost suppressing them from affecting our lives deeply. Yet, in Cuba they are much more present and diffused in peoples' everyday talk and experiences and even, as I think, and as in one way or another, the entire thesis touches upon, further cultivated and explored. In addition, very often they are combined by (a talk of) experiences with spirits of the dead.

The previous chapter touched upon what kind of *muertos* might appear in the lives of *habaneros*, although their presence is fleeting, uncertain, with ambiguous affects and effects and a certain amount of unfamiliarity, or even hostility. The ethnography presented us with what could be called 'alien' *muertos* and then the *nfumbi*. This chapter deals with those *muertos* whose presence, on a phenomenological level at least, seems less uncertain and more 'visible'. As these *muertos* are said to get 'attached' (*se apegan*) to the living by way of 'affinity' (*afinidad*) and, thus, 'belong' (*pertenecen*) to them: I call them 'affines', both them and living individuals they get 'attached' to. 'Affine', as with 'alien', is a relational term; someone is by definition affine to somebody else. Yet, as the 'alien-ness' of the previously mentioned *muertos* is a potential that might be explored and actualized or not, affinity is also one—a potential—that has to be 'acknowledged' (*darle conocimiento*) and 'developed' (*desarrollarse*), or, as alternatively called and signifying both, 'materialized' (*materializarse*).

Celia's *muertos*

Celia is a middle-aged woman I met in the course of my fieldwork, during a *Santería* ritual organized by a common acquaintance. What struck me from the beginning was her propensity to talk to people about quite personal matters, even though she did not know them. On the day I met her, she started making comments on certain peoples' attitudes, and past events that needed further actions in the future. She focused

particularly on one woman who was totally enchanted by Celia's ability to see through her. Celia did not only appear to describe her character in a few minutes as if she knew her all her life and as if she was a fully trained and talented psychologist; she even described her flat, members of her family and certain aspects of her relations with them. The woman nodded in surprise. She also told her that she had a close relationship with particular spirits of the dead and started revealing aspects of their identity. The other woman was totally shocked by Celia's revelations and got so emotional to the point that she started crying. Celia told her that the people who were leading her 'religious life' (*vida religiosa*) were not honest and were doing her more harm than good. The woman had surrendered unconditionally to Celia's powerful *muertos*. In the end they agreed that Celia would pay a visit to her house and conduct a series of cleansing ceremonies, as well as advising her on how to better take care of her own *muertos*. After that event, I tried to approach Celia and get to know her somewhat better. The bond was immediate, as we both confessed to each other later on. We talked for a long time. She was interested in my research but also in my own views about *la religión*. She told me that I was a non-believer, a sceptic, but also that deep inside me there was a profound mystical part. Interestingly enough, she told me that I was a sceptic exactly because there was a spirit, showing affection in me, of a distant relative of mine who had been an intellectual in life and he was also a sceptic and did not believe in spirits. Being a sceptic after all, I was not particularly impressed by Celia's initial revelations, but I was definitely attracted to her personality and we decided to meet again. After that, I became a frequent visitor of Celia and her enormous family, both living and dead, all residing in a big, rundown colonial house in Havana.

Celia has undergone multiple initiations in all of the three traditions under discussion. Nevertheless, she mainly identifies herself as a *santera*, 'daughter' of *Yemayá* (an *oricha* in *Santería* to which she is initiated), with very powerful *muertos*, which are dealt with through *Espiritismo*. Although she is well versed with the *dilogún* oracle (see chapter 4), she places a great emphasis in her ability to divine through her *muertos*. Even when she makes use of the *dilogún*, her *muertos* are ever present and assist her in the interpretation of the oracular signs and complement them, so as to get a more exact and context specific image of the situation in

question. Normally, Celia has images in front of her, whispers in her ears, and very often dreams, which are taken to be her *muertos*' messages. These messages, unlike the use of oracles such as the *dilogún*, are not actively invoked by Celia. They come to her more unexpectedly, although, in her long established relationship with her *muertos*, she may channel them to a degree. I will now describe a telephone conversation I had with Celia so as to give an example of how different the nature of the communication with the dead can be when compared to that with divinities.

In the period the conversation took place my father's uncle was ill and had been taken to the hospital. Celia did not know any details about my family back in Greece apart from the fact that I had a loving and loved father and mother. When I talked to her that day on the phone I told her about my granduncle's poor but recovering health by just adding that, probably, he was also undergoing a kind of depression as his wife had recently died. Celia remained silent for a moment and then, bypassing the central subject of the discussion, which was the poor health of my granduncle, said with absolute confidence: 'Your grandaunt died with a very big preoccupation deep inside her.' A bit surprised I asked: 'What do you mean?' She asked me back: 'Does your granduncle have two daughters?' I said: 'Yes.' She went on without any further questions:

There was a quite serious conflict between the two daughters, and your grandaunt was deeply affected by that. Furthermore, your grandaunt was part of the conflict, as she had to make important decisions that had to do with it directly. It was a particular decision she took that made the conflict even graver. Your grandaunt was a person with a high sense of justice and her decision was for the best of all, but in that decision she had to favour one daughter at the expense of the other. In her dying days, the conflict was buried so as not to upset your grandaunt but she knew that things were not as they appeared to be. She died with this preoccupation in her. You must go to church and have a mass for your grandaunt, light a candle, so that she can rest in peace.

I was deeply impressed, unlike what she had said about me in previous conversations, like the one I referred to when we first met, her words were full of truths which I interpreted as being so specific that I could not claim that they were general and often repeated themes one could by chance get right. Apart from that, Celia, at that moment, had almost no information about my family and especially about its private internal conflicts. In the absence of finding anything else to say, I asked: 'What makes you say so?' She replied: 'My muertos have been with me from the beginning of the conversation; they told me.'

Following from the previous chapter, where I initiated a discussion on how the dead affect peoples' lives by looking at a particular kind of *muertos*—the 'alien'—I now turn to a much broader category which is taken to participate in one's *camino* with more lasting effects, almost to the degree, for some, of becoming constitutive of it. A very common word that is used to describe this kind of *muertos* and their relation with the living, and which implicitly or explicitly serves to distinguish them from the 'alien', is that of 'affinity' (*afinidad*) (see also Espirito Santo 2009a:94-100). In the Afro-Cuban context, *afinidad* is not restricted to and does not necessarily lead to a pleasant and harmonious *camino*. Rather than being merely an *a priori* positive emotional state of being and mind which has to be subsequently enacted, it is realized but also crucially 'developed' (*desarrollarse*) in its very enactment, and not necessarily with obvious and immediate positive results. *Afinidad*, thus, points more to a kind of co-presence, sharing and familiarity—what Tsintjilonis calls 'cenesthesia' (2007:186)—than a reflection and representation of an ideal cosmological or emotional order of things. The latter is or can be the end product rather than the absolute and essential origin, suggesting that we might as well be dealing with an emerging ontology. As I will show, the Cuban *muertos* are entities which are 'evolving' and transforming, as well as quite idiosyncratic in their character and being. It is for this reason that I intentionally do not commence with a pre-existing and established field of knowledge and practice, but, I hope this will convincingly, emerge progressively through the unfolding of my ethnography.

Afinidad could be said to be a sort of quality that binds the living and the dead into a relation of 'belonging', reciprocity and exchange, making (or transforming) them (into) 'affines'. Such a self-explanatory definition becomes less secure if one takes into account that *afinidad* has first to be detected, 'acknowledged' and further 'developed', thus it is not a given that fulfils itself in an automatic fashion; it has to be 'achieved' (Espirito Santo 2009a:227). Nevertheless, this kind of achievement does not construct something—essentially, the world of the *muertos*—out of nothing: '[P]eople *have* spirits, regardless of whether they learn to communicate with them or not' (Espirito Santo 2009a:82). Initially, thus, *afinidad* does come as a given, insofar as *muertos* with specific identities are sensed to having been 'attached' to specific individuals and therefore 'belong' to them. Usually, the

very instance, time, place, and conditions in general of ‘attachment’ do not get to be known either in extensive details or for its particular reasoning, unless retrospectively revealed by the *muerto* itself. Most often, especially in the case of non-mediums, a *muerto* is perceived by a medium as having already been ‘attached’ to the individual and showing its *afinidad*. Whether one will ‘acknowledge’ the affinity, and to what extent, *follows* from this more ‘unnegotiable’ and preexisting ‘fact’ of affinity.

‘Alien’ *muertos* also get ‘attached’ to people, but as soon as a relation with them is negated, they are sent off to the anonymous mass of the dead. ‘Affine’ *muertos* are thought to belong more permanently to a particular individual. If the latter ignores them they will still remain attached (they will not get attached to somebody else), although with potentially negative effects for both. Here, I have to make clear that I have not been able to gather substantial information as to why and how *muertos* get ‘attached’ to particular individuals. Apart from *muertos* who belong to the family, the specific motivation for ‘affinity’ is not clear. Rather, ‘affinity’ was, more than anything else, sensed in its effects and affects—in the very presence of these *muertos*—and not so much for its incentives (apart from the common to all *muertos* desire to ‘develop’, ‘evolve’ and ‘de-materialize’; see below).

But, how and why are *muertos* divided between ‘alien’ and ‘affines’? The beginnings of an answer to this are in looking at how ‘affinity’ is sensed. With the ‘alien’ *muertos*, as we have already seen, what is sensed is a presence with, or of, an absence, so to speak. What is sensed by mediums is ‘something’ which, although it has hints of a human biography it ultimately remains ‘in the dark’, where the ‘alien’ *muerto* is normally said to come from and be sent to. This is a place of radical immanence—these *muertos* are perceived as being too much attached to this world; they preserve their humanity and memories of it in excess—yet, of radical unrelatedness as well. What the mediums sense in ‘alien’ *muertos* is a lack of potential to relate. The ‘alien’ *muertos*, as any other kind of *muertos*, are not sensed continually and permanently as one body perceives the presence of another. *Muertos* appear in the senses more subtly, temporally, gradually and, importantly, according to the ‘affinity’ between the medium and the individual. This last factor suggests that the affinity between the living and the dead is related to the one among the living

and, as it will be shown, among the dead themselves. Remember that my relation with Celia was felt by both of us as one of great affinity. In its course this was accompanied by Celia's *muertos* taking part in it and, furthermore, relating gradually to my own ones. *Muertos*, in other words, not only relate to people but also relate people, therefore, they *are* relations or constitute them, rather than reflecting or symbolizing them.

If, from the mediums' point of view, 'alien' *muertos* are the sensorial affect of the lack of potential to relate, the 'affine' *muertos* are the exact opposite, that is, they are potentials of relations and they are sensed as such. This is what, I think, the word 'affinity' implies. When mediums claim to perceive the presence of a *muerto* they start depicting a 'frame' or 'painting' (*cuadro*) of it. They might begin, for instance, by saying: 'On your side' or 'behind you, comes' or 'it is presented to me' (*a tu lado* or *detrás tuya, viene* or *se me presenta*) such-and-such presence or entity. Then the medium will go on by giving a visual description of how the *muerto* is presenting itself. This can be information about physical aspects, such as the colour of the skin, other racial characteristics, possible bodily peculiarities, or information about objects that are present in the 'frame' and can be seen on or around the person and used by it, such as clothing, tools, cigars, books, and so on. Usually, the descriptions of 'frames' that I have witnessed or been told of, involve movement. The most basic kind is the one that indicates the 'affinity' of the *muerto* to the individual. This is framed as sensing its appearance next to or behind the person, following it. This can be even more indicative by the way the *muerto* might be seen to adopt certain facial and bodily expressions towards the person; a general body language of affection and protectiveness. It might also adopt expressions that hint to its current or a more general state of being, not necessarily directly related to the person. A *muerto* can be seen as happy, serious, sad, or angry. All these images are not different from the way the living express themselves, the *muertos* being after all (ex-)humans. Images might also be of events that happened to the *muertos* and are deemed as ones that they themselves let appear and, thus, are significant. For example, a medium might see the way the person died or an activity that indicates its profession while in life.

Apart from the visual effects or affects, the *muertos* appear by transmitting messages in other ways. They can be heard, often in whispers, saying specific things, or felt. The medium may feel, for example, the sadness or a physical ailment of the *muerto* in his or her own body. Celia tells me that she ‘has’ an African *muerto*. He used to be a slave in the sugar-cane fields of colonial Cuba, he is barely dressed and he is a ‘brute’ (*bruto*) in his manners. Celia informs me that each of her *muertos* tend to transmit messages of a slightly different nature. For example, her African *muerto*, Tomás, when he descends, he normally talks about peoples’ everyday problems, obstacles, enemies and especially issues that involve witchcraft. She tells me that Tomás, although uneducated, had a deep knowledge in the use of plants and witchcraft; he was a *palero*, a *brujo* while in life. It is for this specialized knowledge which was occasionally transmitted to Celia that Tomás was praised, whereas other *muertos* of hers had different domains of knowledge, characters and ways of manifestation. Broadly speaking, the mediums sense in all these ways the presence of *muertos* as revealing perspectives about their own past, when they were alive, and present—often linked to their past— and also about the person they are ‘attached’ to.

Specialized knowledge by different kinds of *muertos* is also accompanied by experiencing them differently, through mediumship. Celia’s Tomás, when he ‘descends’ he makes her smoke cigars, something which she herself does not like to do in his absence, swear, be quite bossy and very interestingly ‘sweat like a pig.’ Celia informs me that normally her sweat does not smell particularly bad. She likes to take care of herself and she has baths and uses perfume on a daily basis; but when Tomás ‘comes down’ (*baja*), the smell is awful, as if it was she who had been working in the sugar-cane fields. Resting on Celia’s accounts, which are not atypical of how mediums experience the presence of their *muertos*, it is hard to see the *muertos* as a mere representation or mental construction of something; slavery, for instance. Mediums do not just think about a past but they think through it and, much more, they experience it and bring it forward to the present; the past thinks through them as well. Tomás’ sweat, apart from signifying his presence, constitutes an essential ingredient of Celia’s experiencing of herself, as this is organically blended with Tomás and his perspective. In the case of ordinary people—those who are not able to directly sense (their) *muertos*—it is through the mediums that they start

learning to ‘acknowledge’ the presence of their *muertos*, although, in relation to the mediums, the experiences are much more subtle and indirect, at least initially.

When a medium communicates with another person it is not always the case that he or she will immediately sense the latter’s *muertos*, at least not in full detail or the totality of them. Yet, it is possible that significant information referring to the person can be revealed, and that is often said, firstly, to be stemming from the medium’s own *muertos* and, secondly, that this is an initial sign of ‘affinity’ between the two—medium and the person—and between their respective *muertos*. Further communication in the future might strengthen the bond, open up the ‘affinity’ or ‘open the path’ (*abrir el camino*) which will entail the flow of even more information both about the individual and his or her *muertos* and even narrow down ‘affinity’ seen as existing and developing between a medium’s particular *muerto* with a particular one of the individual. Thus, ‘affinity’ can be both a general and abstract ‘feeling’, involving persons—dead and alive—and a more specific and, in a way, limited ‘sense’ of a bond between particular aspects of these persons. ‘Affinity’ in this context is not just a diffused and infinite flow of emotion but it is also instantiated by affects and biographical aspects, the last two being intimately related, to the extent that one *is* the other.

Sweat in Celia’s account, was produced in the presence of Tomás and not just sweat; it was a particular, with its own smell, different from Celia’s. As her relation with him had already been ‘developed’, Tomás’ sweat, as an affect, was inextricably bound to his biography as, among others, a ‘sweating slave’ that persisted as a memory and got communicated to Celia. If we were to treat the sweat as ignited by a particular emotional state that Celia faced with the socio-historical reality of slavery, we would be led to conclude or at least imply that Tomás is nothing but a personified construct of Celia’s mind; ultimately her own emotive reaction to slavery. We would then have to dig into her unconscious so as to reveal her inner individual world and how this reacts to the outside ‘objective’ world of, say, history and politics. We would, thus, have constructed a socio-psychological theory of ‘animism’, something in which anthropologists since Tylor (see Tylor 1958) and Frazer (see Frazer 1993) have not been particularly good at (see chapter 6). Furthermore, in this way, we would have performed our disappearing act on Tomás’ existence, partly instantiated

through his sweat, as the latter would belong to no one else other than Celia herself. Consequently, we would be implying that she was just reacting unconsciously and ‘animistically’ to the objective reality of slavery with the equally objective production of sweat (for a similar psychological approach to the effects of the dead see, Krippner 1987, 2008). It is in this sense that I prefer the word ‘affect’, as an essential element of the interaction between the living and the *muertos*, rather than ‘emotion’ or ‘feeling’, because it puts the anthropologist into a more comfortable position to read Celia’s and Tomás’ sweat (and all other affects), not in the familiar category of psychological individualism, but through the, initially at least, more unfamiliar affect of the Cuban ethnography of *muertos*. I, thus, subscribe to what Richard and Rudnyckyj (2009; see also Armstrong 1971; Hirschkind 2001; Swancutt 2008; Tsintjilonis 2007) say on ‘affect’:

The word ‘affect’ captures a way of acting on other actions due to its inherently reflexive quality [...] Affect, which can be both a noun and a transitive verb, simultaneously makes both its subject and its object [...] Furthermore, as will become clear, we conceive of affect not so much as an object circulating among subjects, but rather as a medium in which subjects circulate. Particular affects enable certain types of circulation and foreclose others (2009:59).

Before going on into seeing how the relations between the living and the dead are cultivated and, thus, become an essential part in one’s *camino*, I would like to offer a sort of recapitulation and some possible suggestions-cum-conclusions of what has been already said in this and the previous chapter. If ‘affinity’ is the basic sensorial element and not only the idiom with which relations between the living and the dead are initiated, and this includes a relatively sufficient degree of ‘sensing’, firstly, the biography of the *muerto* and, secondly, that of the living person to whom the former is attached, what seems to be suggested is that this kind of ‘affinity’ is not a strictly rigid affect. Exactly because it is an affect or, rather, a bundle of multiple affects, the *muertos*’ presence is not stable. A specific *muerto* might not be perceived in the same way, or at all, by some mediums, whereas it allows itself to appear to others. Being a medium and a perceptible *muerto* is, thus, not a fixed condition. This can be seen in the following event where an initial and apparent ‘failure’ of mediumship is described, followed by a successful one.

Carmen, a friend of mine in her early thirties, is not a medium herself, but she often visits people who are. Through them, she has gradually come to know ‘her

muertos', their biographies and understand herself through them. For instance, she attributes her unstable but pleasant and funny character, her difficulty with commitment (for example, professionally or emotionally), her tendency to change and move all the time, to a spirit of an Andalusian gypsy woman who is intimately attached to her. Once, Carmen, suddenly and for no apparent reason, became depressed, resulting in her not wanting to leave her house. She also did not want to be in crowded places and, in general, socialize the way she normally did. This almost turned into a phobia, according to her. This mood she felt concerned her and so she sought the advice of a neighbour of hers who lived nearby, and who had a local reputation of communicating with spirits of the dead.

Normally, she would have gone to the medium with which she had a more constant contact, but due to the fact that the latter lived far away from her, her 'agoraphobic' depression initially prevented her from doing so. When she visited her neighbour, he told her that there was a *muerto oscuro* who was causing the depression and they would have to conduct a *rompimiento*, that is, a ritual that would 'break' the afflicting attachment of the *muerto* to Carmen. This would be achieved by ritually disposing of her old possessions, such as damaged and dirty clothes in the place where the *muerto* had come to attach itself, and as a result rendered itself as disposable as the clothes. However, after doing this, the situation got even worse. Carmen, not only felt more depressed and agoraphobic, but she also started having strong nauseas which made her vomit and lose her appetite. It was then that she decided to visit her close contact. This was a decisive move, according to Carmen, because it was proved that it was not at all a *muerto oscuro* but a *muerto* of 'hers', who must have been recently attached to her or let itself made 'felt'. The affliction was a sign, provoked by the *muerto*, in order to draw Carmen's attention to it. It was the spirit of her recently deceased grandmother who had chosen Carmen, as she had always been her favourite grandchild. Carmen told me that as soon as she was told about it she started feeling a bit better. After 'acknowledging' her grandmother's presence as one of 'her' *muertos* and taking care of her (by conducting a mass for her spirit, and lighting some candles, among other things), not only did her affliction gradually disappear, but also she got to know things about her grandmother while in life that she did not know. This balanced considerably her unstable character.

What she got to know about her grandmother, for example, was that when she was younger she had a secret affair with a man from her working environment; whom she had fallen in love with, but because she was already married to Carmen's grandfather and had given birth to their first son she decided to end the affair and dedicate herself to her family. Carmen, according to her grandmother's *posthumous* confession through the medium, was the first person to know of this secret and this was a relief for her grandmother; she felt less uneasy. It is not easy to put into words the complexity of the relations that were brought up in this whole event, therefore, I will try to do so by starting with some of Carmen's final words:

My grandmother needed to let somebody know of her secret so that she could regain her peace of mind. I think that she did and this, as well as the fact that I acknowledged her as my *muerto*, also contributed to my feeling better. Furthermore, my grandmother's presence counter-balances [*equilibra*] the unstable character of my gypsy, which is still an essential part of who I am, and I accept it as such, but through my grandmother I manage or try to avoid its negative results. My grandmother is wise and much more decisive than my gypsy. The secret she revealed to me showed me two things, apart from the secret itself: my grandmother is a bit like me in her amorous life. But she had the decisiveness to sort things out, to choose one thing from the other, while me, especially in the past, I would tend to be more vacillating.

It is clear to see from Carmen's account, how for some people their *muertos* are important in understanding one's self; giving them a deeper understanding and even transforming it; both the self and the understanding of it. She mentions characteristics of herself in the idiom of her different *muertos* which do not only complement but can also 'counter-balance' each other. When she compares her two characteristics she does so by comparing her two *muertos* and, interestingly, in the present tense, how they *are* rather than how they *were*. In effect, the two *muertos* relate to each other through Carmen, although not always without conflicts. I have heard of mediums' *muertos* that do not like each other at all and when the one is present the other is not or when they both are, they cause confusion to the medium, who in his or her turn tries to reconcile or keep them apart, not always successfully. Carmen's account reveals how *muertos* not only *are* but also *become* important. In the beginning, her depression prevents her from going to her friend who is a medium, choosing instead somebody at hand, with a reputation, but not very intimately related to her. The medium who is her neighbour perceives the presence of a *muerto* as causing her depression but he does not sense its identity or biography. His 'diagnosis' is that it is a *muerto oscuro* and the 'prescription' is a *rompimiento*. But

things get worse, so Carmen finally decides to visit her friend. She also confirms the presence of a *muerto* but, in addition to what Carmen has already been told, she perceives it with an identity already known to Carmen—her grandmother. It was this recent appearance of her grandmother as a *muerto* of Carmen which caused the depression in order to gain her attention.

Here, relations are being instantiated on three levels which are all intricately linked. First, we have relations among the living: Carmen and the two mediums (not to mention Carmen's affliction which prevented her from socializing). Second, we are presented with relations among the dead and the living and, third, among the dead. Carmen's first visit was to a superficially known individual. This individual, in his turn, perceived a *muerto* unrelated to Carmen, one without a biography. The second visit was to a much more familiar person who was able to perceive the 'real' identity and biography of the *muerto* and, thus, relate them appropriately. I think that the revelation of her grandmother's secret is also interesting. Not only because of its content but also because it was a secret to begin with. Carmen takes it not only as a revelation of her grandmother's past as a living person—her biography—but, crucially, as something that in the very act of being revealed to her 'chosen' grandchild, transforms (by making her 'feel better') her course as a spirit—her 'necrography' as I call it—which, in its turn, is also seen to transform Carmen's *camino* as well.

These kinds of relations also have an important affective element on various levels: Carmen's affliction is the initial one. The sudden apparition of something that contradicts her (expectations of) character, linked to her gypsy *muerto*, suggests that it might be a case of *muertos*. By seeking the help of mediums, the affects involve them in relation to the sense they have of *muertos*. The first medium senses a *muerto oscuro* and conducts the *rompimiento*. This has its affects on Carmen by intensifying her affliction. She then visits the second medium, who also senses the presence of a *muerto*, but in a different way. Information revealed triggers other affects. 'Acknowledging' the right *muerto* and her buried secrets affect equally the *muerto* and Carmen to whom it is attached and a relation has now been affectively initiated. Relating with her grandmother, Carmen 'discovers' another potential side of herself which she cultivates and differentiates it from, although she still relates it to, the

affects of her gypsy *muerto*. The kind of affinity that is emerging relates all these different persons (the two mediums with their respective *muertos* and Carmen with her own ones), instantiated with, and as knowledge and affects which come to the surface in varying degrees.

Nevertheless, I am not suggesting that there is a linear link between the affinity between a medium and the ‘client’ and the capacity to sense *muertos*. It does not mean that the stronger the bond and knowledge between the first two necessarily reveals more about and from the *muertos*. There are numerous cases where a great deal is revealed among strangers or unknown aspects among known people. Yet, it might be suggested that affinity can be fluid and *muertos*, exactly because (of the way) they are sensed, are just potentials of some sort of relations. Mediumship—as the capacity to sense *muertos*—is as well a potential, and it is not equally distributed to all persons, neither at all times nor in all situations. According to many mediums, everyone is theoretically a medium, that is, they can sense aspects of the presence of *muertos*, although this innate capacity is stronger to some. Intuitions, prophetic visions and dreams, fleeting images of dead people are instances of such capacity, the degree of which varies among each one. Some have it naturally in abundance; others may have to develop it. It is here that all these affective experiences are encompassed and more thoroughly explored by the religious tradition that is said to be the one *par excellence* that does so: *Espiritismo*.

A mass of and for the dead: the public face of ‘necrographies’

On a daily basis, *muertos* make their appearances in a quite private way. They do so in one-to-one consultations, in dreams, in one’s senses (either explicitly or implicitly, as we have already seen), or through an ‘accidental’ meeting with a stranger. Usually, and when seen in isolation, these daily occurrences offer a somewhat fragmented image; firstly, of the dead in question and, secondly, of the totality of the *muertos* that, by way of affinity, are attached to the person. Thus, knowledge of and from the *muertos* in such instances, is also fragmented. This does not mean that is seen as less important. On the contrary, it might prove extremely useful; besides, the accumulation of these experiences is what usually gives a clearer ‘frame’ of a particular *muerto* and the totality of those who are related to the person. For example,

a person might get warned by a *muerto* against visiting a specific place at a specific time because of an imminent accident that will occur to him or her. What course the individual will follow, after such information is transmitted, can, thus, be deemed as life-changing. Indeed, one of the great advantages the messages by the *muertos* are said to display is that their content can be extremely context specific to particular situations, persons, places and times. This, I suspect and as I will further explore in a later chapter, has to do with the fact that these messages are transmitted through the senses and not necessarily in a very formal or ritualized context. Communication with the *muertos* does take place, though, in a more ritualized and public context. It is in such context that the immediate ‘necrographic’ experiences are inserted and, up to an extent, encompassed by something that we could loosely call a pre-existing tradition or cosmology. Here we enter a ritual field of knowledge and practice that is widely known in Cuba as *Espiritismo*.

Espiritismo in Cuba traces its origins from a 19th century Euro-American context where a relatively coherent system of practices and beliefs emerged, especially among the middle and upper classes. This soon came to be known as ‘Spiritism’, or ‘Spiritualism’ in the Anglo-Saxon world. One of its founders is considered to be a French pedagogue called Hippolyte Leon Denizard Rivail, but widely known as Allan Kardec (1804-1869). In the mid-19th century, he began collecting and publishing the ‘doctrine’ of Spiritism which, according to him, stemmed directly from contact with the spirits of the dead through mediums (see Kardec 2003, 2006; see also Abend 2004; Espirito Santo 2009a:17-24; Hess 1991:2-3, 15-19, 59-79; Román 2007a:221-224; Vasconcelos 2007). Spiritism, although heavily drawing from a Christian notion of morality, went against many of the latter’s doctrinal premises and particularly its clerical authority. Communication with the beyond was not seen as being in the sole privileged domain of priests, but was and could be established within lay people as well, provided they followed some general ‘doctrinal’ rules of thumb. Firstly, the Spiritist person would have to lead a moral life, and this was more or less understood to be similar to the Christian ethos. However, rather than focusing on morality as a strict state of being, it emphasized its processual character, as a state of becoming theoretically achievable by everybody, and open to amendment. It is here that Kardec’s professional experience came to be

incorporated in the Spiritist worldview, namely, that of ‘development’, ‘enlightenment’, and ‘education’.

According to the messages from the spirits of the dead Kardec collected, when we are alive we are composed of spirit (our inner essence), matter (the body) and the ‘perispirit’ (an aura that links the first two). Our spirit survives our material death and goes on a long journey of spiritual evolution, towards a direction of purity and enlightenment, whereby we become less dependent on matter. The degree of our morality, mostly exemplified in our deeds (charity, for example) is both the sign of, and the trigger for our spiritual evolution. To continually become and do ‘good’ is the mission of every spirit, although in various degrees, and this continues to be the case after our body has perished. As spirits we might continue doing ‘good’ by helping the living or we might even incarnate to another body. As both the living and the dead are driven by the same moral and spiritual goals, one helps and educates the other in order to achieve them. Although living persons might acquire through their lives and deeds a high degree of evolution, the highest levels are reached without our earthbound bodies, memories and desires. The purest and most enlightened spirits—such as those of saints who are thought to be nearer to God, the absolute and purest spirit—have managed to move beyond this earthly dependence completely. The basic practice of Spiritism has been the contact with the spirits of the dead, so that this mutual spiritual development and education might be verbalized, communicated and acted upon. Traditionally, the most ‘orthodox’ Spiritist groups have made contact with already ‘evolved’ spirits, or at least ones that consciously strive and direct themselves towards enlightenment. For lower spirits there was either indifference or when they appeared, usually causing affliction, the effort was to make them conscious of their death or distance them. Such orthodox adherence to Spiritism is not the norm in Cuba. Although basic premises are embraced, such as ‘evolution’, the kinds of spirits that appear are much broader—lower in purist Spiritist terms—and they embrace the wide range and variability of people the Cuban society was and is consisted of. *Espiritismo*’s most public rituals are often called ‘spiritual masses’ (*misas espirituales*) and it is here that *muertos* are collectively invoked, appeased, described, talked and listened to. In continuation I will describe a *misa* that

is quite exemplary of those that take place in Havana, adding explanatory comments for the sake of clarification.

Today I am invited to a *misa espiritual* that has been organized and headed by a *santera* and *espiritista* friend of mine, Magalis, a middle-aged woman who has initiated, and is the spiritual mentor of a close but dedicated circle of people. Once a month, she conducts a *misa espiritual* dedicated to her own *muertos* and the ones of her ‘godchildren’. Yet, less frequent visitors, such as myself, are most welcome to attend.

As I enter the living-room I immediately notice that it has been particularly arranged for the event. The big dining table has been removed from sight and instead there is a small square table, called *bóveda espiritual*, clad in a long white cloth. On top there are seven glasses of water. The one in the middle is slightly bigger than the rest and in it there is immersed a crucifix. Two lit candles are also placed on the table. On the left and right side of the table there are two chairs. My eye catches certain objects lying on the floor behind and next to the table and the two chairs. A hat made of palm leaves, a blue head scarf, a packet of cigarettes, a couple of cigars, a bottle of rum and a book. In front of the table on the floor lies a plastic bucket full of water and flower petals. Next to the bucket there is a small bottle of cheap perfume. Next to each chair on the left and right side of the table, there is a row of chairs facing each other, creating, in that way, a sort of corridor running from the table to the other end, where it extends to the sofas and armchairs that the sitting-room is normally furnished with. The whole room has been made more colourful due to the abundant presence of freshly cut flowers.

As people start to arrive, they slowly take their seats as they please, apart from the two chairs next to the table. These are reserved for the two ‘head mediums’ (*mediums cabeceros*) of the ceremony, Magalis and a slightly younger woman, one of her oldest *ahijadas*, whose long experience in *Espiritismo* has put her next to Magalis in leading the ceremony. As soon as everybody has been seated, there is a short period of silence, as if each person is momentarily contemplating for themselves what is about to take place. Magalis, with her eyes closed, starts chanting prayers from the Gospel and gradually the rest follow her. These are sung in Spanish and they include several ‘Our Father’ and ‘Hail Marys’. When this preliminary

chanting, considered essential to invoke the spirit world, finishes each one of us, beginning with the *mediums cabeceros*, stands in front of the table, bends down and takes some water from the bucket and spreads it over our forehead, neck, arms and legs. This act is considered to rid us any negative ‘energies’ (*energías*) or ‘influences’ (*influencias*) that the person might have brought ‘from the street’. After this self-cleansing, each one of us resumes to our seat and more chanting takes place. Then there is a pause and Magalis starts enumerating names of spirits that belong to her ‘spiritual cord’ (*cordón espiritual*) and have made their appearance to her through time and provided indispensable help to her and, by extension, to her *ahijados*.

When somebody refers to his or her *cordón espiritual* they mean the totality of the *muertos* that are attached in an intimate way to him or her. *Cordones espirituales* might contain *muertos* ‘of the family’ (*familiares*) or previously complete strangers. By definition, *muertos* in one’s *cordón* are those of whom a wealth of biographical information is known, usually, and especially in the case of complete strangers, revealed gradually by the *muertos* themselves. According to the spiritist doctrine, the spirits of the dead get attached to a particular individual—that is, include themselves in one’s *cordón*, in the Cuban spiritist idiom—so as to acquire ‘light’ (*luz*), ‘evolve’ (*evolucionar*) spiritually in the effort to transcend the materiality of this world and become ‘purer’ spirits. This is mainly achieved by helping the individual who, in his or her turn, will help the spirits attain their goal. Because each spirit finds itself at a particular point in spiritual evolution, the individual’s role in the latter is crucial, especially in the case of less evolved spirits.

In the Cuban spiritist cosmos, spirits are classified, in relation to the individual they are attached to, in ‘spirit guides’ (*espíritus guías*), ‘protectors’ (*protectores*) and ‘of labour’ (*de labor*). The first is usually one that has achieved a high degree of evolution and familiarization with the person and guides it to wellbeing. It is also seen as supervising the rest of the spirits. This bares striking resemblances with the way initiation in the Afro-Cuban religious traditions occurs, as basically, ‘making’ one entity and ‘receiving’ a number of others (see chapter 4). *Espíritus protectores* are the rest of the spirits, each one with its particular biographical baggage and specialized powers and knowledge, protecting the

individual. The *espíritus de labor* are often seen as a sub-category of the previous and what makes them such is the fact that normally they are the ones who are thought to take care of the most everyday and mundane needs of the person, often after being commanded to. These are seen as occupying a lower position in the spiritual ladder and being more material. Magalis tells me that they can be compared to the *nfumbi* having less light and being quite material, but, as she stresses, with the important difference that the latter remain entrapped in their materiality, standing almost no chance of evolving. The former, on the other hand, are in the process, no matter how low, of ‘enlightenment’ and ‘spiritual evolution’, something which the *espiritista* should ideally contribute to by not ‘materializing’ them excessively.

In *misas espirituales*, like the one I am describing, the main issue at stake is to create a collective channel of communication with the spirit world and, more specifically, those spirits that are related in one way or another to the people present. The articulation of the *muertos*’ perspectives is considered to be one of the most important ways to achieve ‘materialization’. If on an initial level the perspectives appear in the senses, in order to further become fuller and meaningful, they have to be directed and transmitted to their intended recipients through language. After the spirit world has been invoked, the word takes Magalis’ *ahijada*. Turning to a young girl in her twenties, she says:

With the permission of the table [*con el permiso de la mesa*], it is presented to me [*se me presenta*] a presence of a mulata, with green eyes and straight hair, very pretty, dressed in yellow. I can see her giggling all the time and, at times, she bursts into sudden and loud laughs. She moves around you as if dancing.

The young woman nodded in silence, as if she was waiting to hear for more. A middle-aged man kindly interrupts the conversation:

Con el permiso, I perceive her coming with a yellow head scarf and two huge golden earrings. She is from a humble background but she is elegantly dressed and, indeed, she can dance with real skill. She says that she likes you a lot and that she is helping you with your obstacles in life, especially, your financial problems.

Another woman seized the opportunity:

She is asking for sunflowers and honey [as offerings], you know, her saintly current [*corriente santoral*] is Ochún [meaning that the *muerto* had an affinity with the *oricha* Ochún]. She also wants you to make a doll of her, of how she was in life, so that she becomes more materialized and is able to help you resolve [*resolver*] [your issues] with more success.

‘Ay carajo [something like, ‘oh shit’ or ‘goddamn it!’], a harsh voice interrupted the smooth and polite interaction of perspectives. It was Magalis, whose voice had turned deeper and rougher, as if it was almost a man’s. Her otherwise mellow and soft words had also vanished:

Can’t you see you innocent and naïve spirits, that the girl is a whore? Can’t you see that she sells her young and tender body off to the old and white skin of the yumas [almost derogatory term for Americans or tourists]?

Turning to the young woman:

You think that money is everything. It may buy you nice clothes, drinks and foreign cigarettes but the way you earn it will put you in the hospital or in prison. And what about the small creature you are carrying in your belly? Will you feed him from the dirty fucks with the old yumas?

At that point, the woman sitting next to the girl shouted: ‘Luz [light]!’ This is normally uttered when a piece of information is deemed particularly powerful in its truth and implies a strong agreement. This was the girl’s mother, who added:

I have repeatedly told her that what she is doing is dangerous, but she doesn’t listen to me, she is very stubborn. And now you also tell us that she is pregnant; this we didn’t know.

Magalis went on:

She is stubborn as her mulata [referring to the previously described spirit]. You have to give light to this spirit; you have to attend your other spirits, the ones with more light. They will help you and your mulata develop. Listen to Ta’ Jose, he also lived with the worst and he immediately saw through you, as if you were transparent.

Ta’ Jose is the spirit guide of Magalis, an old black man, as she describes him, who lived in extreme poverty but he was very wise, honest, hard-working, and a natural medium. Meanwhile, the girl had burst into tears interrupted by sudden bursts of laughs (efforts of the *mulata* to possess her, as Magalis later told me). Her mother was trying to scold and console her at the same time. Magalis, then, started chanting to the ‘African comission’ (*comisión africana*).

Spirits of the dead are grouped into ‘commissions’ according to their ethnic or professional background. For example, there is the ‘Indian commission’ (*comisión india*), the ‘Arab’ (*arabe*), the ‘Gypsy’ (*gitana*), the ‘medical’ (*medica*), and so on. The chant, as Magalis explained later, was always chanted to ‘give light’ to her African (spirit), Ta’ Jose, the Africans of the people present and the Africans

worldwide, but also in this particular case for the *mulata* of the girl. The chant diverted from the Catholic feeling and content of the previous prayers. It contained creolized words and it talked about everyday events. A man grabbed a wooden box and started beating it as if it was percussion. The rhythm got quicker and quicker. All of a sudden, I glance at Magalis who, with her eyes closed, starts spinning around her shoulders and neck. After some spinning, she stops for a while, with her head hanging from her neck, as if staring at the floor but with her eyes still closed. She then gives a shiver and produces a strange sound with her vocal cords without opening her mouth. She almost kneels on the floor and adopts a posture and starts producing sounds that, to me, clearly resemble that of a chicken! She goes on like this for a while and then she stands up in the middle, exclaiming: 'Good evening.' All the people answer back, 'Good evening', and some by adding 'Ta' Jose.' Magalis' accent has transformed. It is a creole accent, probably similar to how the first Africans who learned Spanish might have sounded. Her manner has also transformed similarly to her intervention with the girl but even more accentuated.

Magalis/Ta' Jose likes to swear, smoke cigars, and wear his hat made of palm leaves, which the other 'head medium' hastens to offer her/him. Occasionally, Ta' Jose takes small sips of rum, some of which he abruptly spits instead of drinking. Ta' Jose speaks roughly, often with words that would normally be taken as insults, but he is also praised, as I come to realize by the reactions of the rest, for his tendency to speak bare truths, directly, often in a scolding but also humorous and affectionate manner. He reveals *muertos* of the others, cases of *brujería*, mentions mistakes or hidden secrets of the people present. After finishing his comments about each one of us, which took a bit more than an hour, he says it is time to go. Ta' Jose in Magalis' body takes a few spins, the other *medium cabecero* assisting him/her not to fall and slapping his/her face softly. Ta' Jose departs and Magalis is seated exhausted on her chair. 'What happened?' she asks. The other medium explains briefly while Magalis, bathed in sweat, drinks some water and lights a cigarette. 'Good' she puffs out, 'I hope you liked it.'

The rest of the ceremony interchanges between chants and various people, apart from the two leading mediums, offering their mediumistic capacities by describing what happens in peoples' lives and their *muertos* that let themselves

appear. Others pop in and give a complementary image, filling in the ‘frames’ or describing *muertos* unseen by others. After five hours the *misa* comes, almost naturally, to an end; chants are now sung bidding farewell to the spirit world, *se van los seres, se van* (‘off go the entities, off they go’) and the *misa* concludes.

The potentials of ‘necrographies’

One very peculiar thing that the Cuban ‘necrography’ presents us with is that a large part of the interaction between the living and the dead occurs long after and very often radically detached from the moment of death. The identities, biographies, wishes, worries and perspectives of and from many *muertos* appear in a context relatively independent of the ‘fact’ of death and the formal funeral proceedings—which normally serve as ameliorating ‘the commonly encountered discrepancy between the event of physical death and the social recognition of it’ (Bloch and Parry 1982:13)—that most of the accounts on death have accustomed us to.¹⁷ In most of these accounts, the ‘discrepancy’ is usually mediated by funerary acts, even in the cases when something goes ‘wrong’ and unsettles the ‘normal’ expectations towards the dead (see for example du Boulay 1982). Furthermore, and probably related, although not necessarily, to the above, most accounts depict mortuary rites as a process of ‘finishing (off)’ (Course 2007:79; Tsintjilonis 2004b:376) the dead by way of ‘forgetting’ (Tsintjilonis 2004b:376) and ‘analysis’ (Course 2007:77):

According to this view, what mortuary practices do is to undo the complex social ties which once held the living person together, and to thereby make visible and explicit the part of which that person was composed (Course 2007:77).

The ethnographic answer of both Tsintjilonis and Course to this conventional ‘necrographic’ current is, in one word, ‘remembering’ and ‘synthesis’, respectively. There are stark ethnographic differences between the two; for example, Tsintjilonis identifies the ‘remembering’ as ultimately stemming from the dead Toraja themselves, importantly through the senses and the body (see also Tsintjilonis 1995, 1997, 2007), whereas Course describes how the ‘synthesis’ is mainly constituted

¹⁷ To mention only but a few and highly selective examples, see Barraud *et.al.* 1994; Bloch and Parry 1982; Course 2007; Damon and Wagner 1989; du Boulay 1982; Hertz 1960; Keesing 1982; Malinowski 2008; Panourgíá 1995; Seremetakis 1991; Tsintjilonis 2004a, 2004b, 2006, 2007; Vitebsky 1993.

through the recounting of the deceased's biography by the living Mapuche. In any case, both accounts offer a far more enriching image of what 'finishing (off)' the dead might involve and not necessarily under the light—albeit belated and transitory in the Hertzian sense—of death as ultimately, and universally as Bloch and Parry (1996) imply, the 'end'.

The Cuban *muertos*, from what I evinced during my fieldwork, more than often appeared with a relative long 'distance' from their physical death and even their burial and other post-mortuary attention, which, as I said before, normally mediates between physical death and its social recognition. This 'distance' is not to be understood in just temporal terms, but as a much more complex, multifarious, and general tendency. Apart from *muertos* appearing in peoples' lives long after their time of death, they might also appear far from where their death took place. Remember that Yosdado's eventually-turned-into-*nfumbi muerto* (see previous chapter) appeared almost a century later and, although the death occurred in Pinar del Rio, the *muerto* was wandering in Havana—although it led Yosdado back to Pinar del Rio. Furthermore, and I think more interestingly, the *muertos*' distance is premised on what in the case of the 'affines' is sought to be established out of its initial lack but not absence, that is, 'affinity' or else intimacy. This is much more evident and obvious with the 'alien' *muertos* which, as we have seen, their very constitution as such is the lack of potential for 'affinity' and intimacy with the living. But with the 'affines' as well, although intimacy is a much more definitive potential, it very often comes as an un(der)developed one. To put it differently, the Cuban *muertos*, be they 'alien' or 'affines', have the tendency to be, initially at least, 'strangers'.

The implications are far more complex than a mere 'metaphysical' phenomenon and preoccupation and could be linked to the particularities of the Cuban social history, and more specifically to those of Cuban kinship. In most anthropological accounts on death, there is an implicit connection with kinship categories, and this is verbalized as the dead being 'ancestors'. The relations between the living and the dead are normally depicted to a certain extent as, firstly, exhibiting continuity due to their intimacy and, secondly, as undergoing a transformation that mainly involves a waning of such intimacy. The dead, in the majority of the

accounts, are familiar to the living, they are often remembered as they were in life, and they are attached to the latter by way of kinship. This, I believe, resonates with the tendency I mentioned of many approaches on death to encounter it in its relative proximity to life, making the funerary rites and what follows *from* them the ‘necrographic’ instance *par excellence*.

The Cuban ‘necrographic’ instance, under such commonly shed light, seems quite displaced, so to speak, even in ‘kinship’ or familiarity terms. Not all ‘affine’ *muertos* are family members nor do all family members become ‘affines’ once dead. The fact that family members *may* become ‘affines’, often seen as a sub-category of the latter when they are grouped under the generic term of *muertos familiares*, points exactly to the above. Although *muertos familiares* may appear to their living ‘affines’ in somewhat more explicit and familiar ways (often in visions while awake or asleep), this does not place them in a radically different position from the rest of the ‘affine’ *muertos*. This is why mediums play such a crucial role in establishing a more flowing communication with them. Although mediumship is considered as a ‘gift’, it is also said to be a potential of everyone and it is only its degree that very broadly divides mediums from non-mediums (see Espirito Santo 2009a:77-78, 96-100).¹⁸

One can *become* a medium, and yet still the majority are not (or have not fully become), and hence the need for those who are (or have become). Thus, from the non-medium’s point of view, others-as-mediums are required to fully sense ‘their’ others-as-*muertos*, which makes the initial ‘alien-ness’ of *muertos* even more pronounced. Carmen’s case is telling, not only because she contacted her *muerto familiar*—her grandmother—through an *espiritista*, but also because unknown and unfamiliar aspects of her grandmother’s biography came to light and influenced Carmen’s *camino*. Consequently, even in the case of *muertos familiares*, what is pursued is something novel and not something already and definitively known. With the ignition and further increase of such a flow, the *muertos* are perceived to ‘evolve’ or ‘develop’ themselves, and this is inextricably connected to a parallel evolving of the relations between the living and the dead, directly, if one is a medium (and then

¹⁸ For a similar description of shamanism, see Viveiros de Castro 1992:218-238, 2004a: 468-471; Willerslev 2007:124-125, 139-140.

mediumship itself is said to ‘evolve’ or ‘develop’) or indirectly, if one is not (although ‘developing’ your dead always involves an amount of developing your own mediumship as well).

The notion of ‘evolution’ and ‘development’ implies that the ontological status of *muertos* is not a stable but a fluid condition. Here, in my opinion, arises a fundamental difficulty in seeking an ethnographic definition of the Cuban *muertos*. An easy path to get round to it would be to follow strictly and literally the most ‘doctrinal’ parts of what is taken as *Espiritismo* and how they might ‘give away’ hints of a definition (more on this below). Another easy path would be to argue that the *muertos*’ fluidity is such that they defy definition in the first place and, thus, define them negatively as the entities for which any kind of definition is not and cannot be made applicable. Both paths, in their frugality, might sound attractive and convincing, even more so because they could be demonstrated ethnographically. But, they are also simplistic and could, also ethnographically, be challenged. As for the second path, for the moment, I would limit myself by responding that, although indeed *muertos* are not overtly visible and tangible entities like, say, humans are, they are nevertheless positively perceived as distinct kinds of entities and not of an inherently chaotic or anarchic constitution. Furthermore, they are distinguished from other ‘invisible’ and ‘intangible’ entities such as deities, as we shall see in the following chapter. The first path is more difficult to disentangle, but by doing so in the remaining of this chapter, I hope that the specific features and potentials of *muertos* will become more salient.

One could argue that entities like *muertos*, be they ‘alien’ or ‘affines’, and deities are defined by their relation to humanity and non-humanity. Their present status as such is moulded by and, at the same time, differentiated from their previous condition. *Muertos* are ex-humans, while deities are often said to be ex-*muertos*—this is encapsulated in the often repeated phrase *ikú lobi ocha*, which is loosely translated as *el muerto pare el santo* or ‘the dead gives birth to the saint’ (see Esprito Santo 2010:68-69; Fernández Martínez 2005:36-39; Fernández Martínez and Porras Potts 1998:31-32)—or ‘senior dead’ (*muertos mayores*) and, by implication, ex-ex-humans. Leaving the deities aside for the time being, I will comment on the humanity of *muertos*, which as I just said is seen to be potentially ‘evolving’ and

‘developing’. In terms of a *camino*, the living and the dead are both perceived as *having* one, while, as I will try to show later, deities are closer to being conceived as *being* themselves *caminos*. This may be congruent with the claim that people ‘have’ *muertos* when they are related to them, whether temporarily or more permanently, while deities ‘own’ and, thus, ‘have’ people, by being their ‘owners’ or ‘parents’. One could almost theologically conclude that deities ‘encompass’ (see Dumont 1972) both the living and the dead, considering that they—the deities—‘own’ the living, who in their turn ‘own’ the dead. Let us for now focus on what this ‘possessive’ relationship between the living and the dead might involve.

If one were to look for the most ‘doctrinal’ parts of *Espiritismo*, the two most obvious sources would be either to refer to spiritist texts mainly produced outside Cuba—and dating back to the Euro-American spiritist movement and its founders—or, with a more ethnographically attuned mind, to approach a specific spiritist movement that in Cuba is known as ‘scientific spiritism’ (*espiritismo científico*). Due to the lack of space and substantial firsthand knowledge of this current, I will briefly mention what one is likely to encounter as a basic spiritist premise (for a more detailed exposition, see Espirito Santo 2009a:264-297, 2010). This is the notion of ‘evolution’ which is seen as a more or less linear and hierarchical process of transformation from a ‘material’, ‘low’, ‘dark’ and ‘earthly’ condition of being to a more ‘spiritual’, ‘elevated’, ‘of light’ and ‘otherworldly’ one, which can be evinced in the broader spiritist spectrum and not just the ‘scientific’ stream. What is much more prevalent in the latter is; first, a clearer and stricter articulation of such an ‘evolutionist’ scheme; second, a tendency to moralize it through a lens that combines ‘Christian’ and ‘scientific’ values—‘low’ spirits tend to be evil or intellectually backward and ‘high’ spirits, good or intellectually progressive—and third, a practical interaction with ‘high’ spirits while a tendency to exhibit indifference and even aversion to ‘low’ ones. The interaction with the latter is often limited to acts of distancing them, similar to the case of ‘alien’ *muertos*, but with a quite different reasoning. As we have seen, ‘alien’ *muertos* are perceived as such because they are sensed as not belonging to the individual and not because they are inherently evil or backward; even if they are normally perceived as causing

misfortunes, this is so because they do not have the potential to be related to anyone and not the other way round.

The interaction with the dead, outside the confines of a purist ‘scientific’ stream of *Espiritismo* also takes on board the notion of ‘evolution’ and ‘development’, but on rather different terms. The fact that spirits of the dead which, from the purist point of view, were considered ‘low’, would enter into more reciprocal relations with the living and constituted their ‘affines’, tended to relativize or even become indifferent to a strictly moralizing attitude towards them. This, in its turn, creates a quite different understanding of the notion of ‘evolution’ itself, one that undermines considerably, if not being explicitly opposed to, the ‘evolutionist’ aspects of its purist version. When discussing these ‘internal’ distinctions of *Espiritismo* with my *espiritista* friend Magalis, she argued that *los científicos* were much more ‘selective’ (*selectivos*), ‘exclusivist’ (*exclusivistas*), and therefore ‘limited’ (*limitados*) when it came to which *muertos* they would interact with. In one of her final comments she said:

Los científicos take Kardec’s books too literally and miss the point. They interact with muertos already evolved, while education and evolution is a need [*necesidad*] much more pressing for what they call low spirits, whom they actively choose to exclude from their educational project [*proyecto educacional*; often spiritist sessions and groups are called ‘little schools’ (*escuelitas*)]. It is like when capitalist countries choose to make higher education private, which means that only affluent people can go to the university. When education is a public and free of charge matter, then the people choose if they want to study and they are not chosen [because of their socio-economic status]. When I perceive a muerto belonging to one’s cordón espiritual, how can I ignore it and treat it as a stranger [*desconocido*]? If I did so, that would make backward [*atrasar*] both the muerto and the person, and affect them negatively.

This more ‘popular’ and commonly encountered attitude towards *muertos* often classified as *Espiritismo cruzado* (‘crossed’ or ‘mixed spiritism’; see Espirito Santo 2009a, 2010), highlights two crucial and interconnected elements. First, the living do not choose ‘their’ *muertos* but the other way round. Second, *muertos* are perceived as entities which either ‘belong’ or not to a person. Those who do, no matter their initial degree of ‘evolution’, *should*, by definition, be ‘developed’ while those who do not should be avoided. Thus, it is not the moral and intellectual constitution of *muertos* that is highlighted but their perceived potential of and for ‘affinity’ and, in the final analysis, a more inclusive and encompassing definition of what a *muerto* is and can be.

‘Alien’ *muertos* are ‘low’ spirits not because of their inherent evil or intellectually impaired character. They are ‘low’ because they act as if they were still alive, they are too much attached to their biography and affective memories of their past condition and therefore find it difficult to relate to the living as *muertos*, that is, as ‘other’ kinds of entities; entities that have transcended and ‘othered’ themselves sufficiently enough in order to be someone’s *muertos*. Put differently, ‘alien’ *muertos* cannot adopt a point of view that would perceive their past selves from the outside, as an ‘other’ and, therefore, they act and perceive things through their past (self) conflating it with the present. This is why, as paradoxical as it may sound, when they are sensed, a profound lack of biographical information dominates the mediums’ capacity to perceive them, which is followed by a lack of oracular knowledge concerning the living person that they have temporarily been ‘attached’ to. Conflating their past with their present they can neither adopt a point of view that is ‘useful’ for the living, a point of view that transcends past, present and future, not because it conflates them but because it can have a glance at them simultaneously with the livings’ present. In these fleeting instances of contact the danger that lurks for both the living and the dead, is that they will keep on perceiving themselves in the absence of the other, whereas the opposite could suggest the promising affects and effects of relations. When people say that ‘alien’ *muertos* are excessively ‘material’, what I think they mean is not exactly the same as the purist and evolutionist version of spiritism has it. ‘Matter’ is not so much a measure and indicator of morality and intellectual abilities, but a degree of alterity and disembodiment from the world of the living from which all *muertos* have initially departed and have now to follow a different path: a *camino de muerto*. An alterity that, as the ‘necrography’ of ‘affine’ *muertos* is pointing to, requires a precarious and not automatic effort to obtain the adequate kind of distance from one’s biography in order to remember it, let it be ‘seen’ and ‘see’ it, and consequently relate (it) with the living.

‘Affine’ *muertos* evolve ontologically so as to cement their identity as *muertos*. In order to do so they adopt an external point of view of their biography, they transmit it to the living along with a perspective that concerns the biographies of the latter. The tension is not to confuse the two and that is what I believe is suggested

by the effort to ‘materialize’ them adequately, so as not to cut the flow of this perspectival capacity. Sometimes, ‘affines’, after being developed as such through a long interaction with the living, are perceived to disappear or, else, they cease to be perceived. That, according to the purist spiritist view, is an indicator that they have reached a high level of spiritual evolution and de-materialization. Furthermore, this is not so much an abrupt phenomenon, but a slow process wherein the *muerto* starts loosing its distinctive character and affects and adopts a much more generic and anonymous presence:

In this sense, an evolved spirit is knowledgeable in an almost ‘abstract’ way, and indeed, is seen to embody a kind of anonymity in which personalistic traits are denied, suggesting that ascension involves some kind of ‘merging’ with a ‘oneness’ that obliterates the importance of biographical details (Espirito Santo 2009a:108).

This observation (see also Espirito Santo 2009a:293, 2010:78; Garoutte and Wambaugh 2007:162-163) resonates with Kardec’s own declarations that were said to derive directly from the messages of the dead:

It is only when spirits have arrived at a certain degree of purification that they are entirely freed from all corporeal influences; and as long as they are not completely *dematerialised* (to employ their own expression), they retain most of the ideas, tendencies, and even the *hobbies*, they had while on earth (Kardec 2006:46).

I only met one person that described to me the complete disappearance from her *cordón* of a *muerto*, although spirits which were considered as highly ‘evolved’ indeed appeared more subtly. Emilia, an *espiritista* friend, told me that once she ‘had’ in her *cordón espiritual* the spirit of a distant relative of hers. Over the course of 20 years she had developed a very intimate relation with it. The last five years of their ‘affinity’, Emilia says, her *muerto* started gradually to become more and more ‘diffuse’ (*difuso*) and ‘absent’ (*ausente*). For instance, it would not present itself in *misas espirituales* by possessing Emilia’s body, but it would appear in more intangible ways and would tend to pass on messages that were not of an ‘everyday significance’ (*importancia cotidiana*). In all these years, Emilia had ‘made’ (*hacer*) various ‘materializations’ of her *muerto*, such as a doll with objects that the *muerto* itself had indicated, which, according to her, would ‘channel’ (*canalizar*) her communication and interaction with it. As the latter started to become more subtle and general, she initially also started to ‘use’ (*usar*) these ‘materializations’ less often, up to the point that she ignored them completely and even got rid of them.

Emilia stresses that there was no use for them any more, as her *muerto* ceased to recognize itself in them; it was ‘transcending’ (*trascendiendo*). Now, Emilia says, she does not feel its presence at all, at least not in any direct way. Every now and then, she feels a light breeze like the one she used to feel in the presence of it, but: ‘This is what is left of it, nothing else; a breeze blowing from wherever it is now.’

Emilia’s account suggests that the *camino de muerto*, as an evolving ontological process, may reach a point that highly resembles the very first steps of its ‘career’. Indeed, her ‘transcended’ *muerto* slowly became what one could argue *muertos* initially appear as: ‘strangers’, anonymous and almost ‘absent’. Nevertheless, their ‘alien-ness’ does not only refer to the living, as the initial ‘necrographic’ stage seems more often to do. *Muertos*, as strangers, are so in relation to the living. Whereas *muertos* as ‘affines’ have managed, with the indispensable support of the living, to become strangers to their own past selves, to their biography and body and follow their *camino de muerto* to the unknown; finally estranged from every-body, theirs and their ‘affines’. Forgetting their humanity, passes through an all important process of remembering, because only by remembering can they gradually cease being what they were. As Viveiros de Castro puts it, ‘[i]t is difficult to forget the dead—since only the dead forget’ (1992:201). In the following chapter, I will deal ethnographically with the other-than-human entities that are recognized as deities, and in particular those that are said to belong to a specific Afro-Cuban religious tradition, the *Regla de Ocha/Ifá* or else *Santería*, the *orichas*. To cite once more Viveiros de Castro as a way of an extremely short yet concise introduction to them, ‘[t]o be transformed into a divinity is to forget’ (1992:213).

CHAPTER 4

OBJECTS AS ORACLES, ENTITIES AS MYTHS the perspectives of the *orichas*

In the previous two chapters I explored the somatic and affective nature of oracular perspectives, as this is mediated by and experienced through the various degrees and kinds of *muertos*. Such perspectives have the tendency to be idiosyncratic, context specific and to reveal information both about their transmitters—the *muertos*—and their receivers—the living. These oracular pronouncements tend to become intensified in quantity and quality as the *muertos*' ontological transformation is put into motion; something in which the living play an active role. Whilst their perspectives seem to be vague or even absent; when they are perceived to be either stagnant and too attracted to this world ('alien' *muertos*) or that they have transcended it more definitely (highly evolved *muertos*); it is in their transition from *vivos* ('living') to *muertos*-as-'affines' that this oracular intensity and propensity can mostly be evinced.

I now wish to move onto another 'kind' of oracular perspective that, from at least a phenomenological point of view, exhibits great affinities as well as differences. This chapter will initiate a comparison by focusing on the latter, while the next will open up the dialogue by including the affinities. As I hope I have made explicit, the ethnography of the *muertos* and their perspectives ('necrography'), although clustered around, feeding and being fed by cosmological traditions, such as *Palo* and *Espiritismo*, cannot be strictly identified with them, in the sense that what is emphasized is the very interaction with particular other-than-human entities, rather than an *a priori* and unreflexive commitment to these traditions. As I see it, this is because 'necrographies' essentially appear in the body and the senses. However, oracular perspectives have another important source which places the body and the senses in a somewhat secondary position and, instead, emphasizes a more 'material' and 'objective' dimension. Here, objects-as-oracles make their appearance and, more interestingly are linked to an initially less idiosyncratic collection of biographies, grouped in the form of cosmological myths, the totality of which is meant to be able

to embrace and explain ‘everything’. Because of this, the crucial role of objects-as-oracles is to discern and choose from this cosmological and mythological totality the particular ‘stories’ that correspond to the divination at issue. The entities that play the leading role belong more securely to the realm of divinities rather than that of *muertos*. Furthermore, these divinities and their perspectives are more securely organized around an explicit cosmology, a religious tradition.

The one that seems to be more prevalent and diffused is that of an allegedly Yoruba origin, known as *Regla de Ocha/Ifá* or *Santería*. It is to this tradition that the aforementioned collection of myths, which are employed in divination are unquestionably said to belong to, preserved and constantly (re)interpreted. These myths have had such a catalytic effect on the divinatory Afro-Cuban cosmos that they have left their permanent mark on it and continue to do so. Indeed, when people get to know significant information from the *orichas*—the deities of *Ocha/Ifá*—and act in relation to them, they often make references to mythological events and stories that the latter are said to be ‘born’ (*nacen*) from. Here, oracular pronouncements stem from, get materialized and condensed in ‘signs’ (*signos* in Spanish, *oddu* in Yoruba), and make their appearance as the oracles of *Ocha/Ifá* are cast by the diviners and are seen to throw light on the ‘path’ (*camino*) of the client. It is with these oracles, as is often stressed by initiates, that more permanent aspects of one’s *camino* are revealed as well as one’s ‘past, present and future’ (*pasado, presente y futuro*). In fact, *camino* and *pasado, presente y futuro* are interchangeably employed to such extent that one *is* the other. Although in quantitative terms these objects-cum-oracles can be consulted on a regular and everyday basis, their particular efficacy is said to reside in the instances when they are employed in order to discern those *signos* that ‘accompany’ (*acompañar*) the individual in his or her life as a whole and permanently. This contrasts with the situation I was describing in the last two chapters, where the emphasis seems to be on a more spontaneous, affective, and not necessarily long-lasting ‘revelation’ of perspectives and even relations. This oracular ‘accompaniment’ occurs in instances of minor or major acts of initiation. Indeed, any act deemed as such, always involves divination in which, not only are particular deities attached to the person, but also particular *signos* that contain a wealth of

information of what this person is or should be. It is also with these *signos* that it is decided with which deity he or she is related and how.

Deities, like *muertos*, also appear and communicate with humans in a somatic and affective way. They do so, for instance, by way of spirit possession of the initiated but, unlike *muertos*, this is always accompanied by a trance (see Hagedorn 2001:75-77, 107-135). They may also appear—to both initiated and non-initiated—in dreams or while awake, but usually in a more indirect and less obvious way than *muertos*. One ‘senses’ a deity through a vast number of ‘signs’ to which it is associated. Each deity has a relatively fixed collection of attributes: these are certain character traits, strengths and weaknesses, specialized abilities and knowledge, elements of nature, favourite foods, plants and animals, corresponding chants and ‘stories’ (*patakín*, in Yoruba), which mention aspects of their biographies, including why and how they came to be associated with the above attributes and their relations with other *orichas* (for a broad classification, see Bolívar Aróstegui 2005). Unlike *muertos*, who exhibit a quite idiosyncratic character and biography, which is shared with and communicated to particular individuals, the deities’ character and biographies are shared with many individuals simultaneously and, therefore, are much more collectively known and experienced. A *muerto*’s history and wishes are revealed as long as these come into existence spontaneously or gradually, but essentially through the senses. Those of an *oricha* are already known in a generic form through the widely shared and articulated mythology. Thus, what divination throws light onto, is which *oricha* or cluster of them is related to the person. A step further is to fathom which particular aspects, often called *caminos* or ‘tendencies’, of this *oricha* or cluster are more intimately related to him or her. This is not so straightforward, as *orichas* are many ‘things’ at the same time and not all apply to the individual with the same intensity. For example, the *oricha Eleguá*, under the guise of different *caminos*—and appearing to ‘speak’ in different oracular signs—may be a divinity whose behaviour as a trickster is emphasized, or as one that controls the ‘paths’ and the ‘doors’ or in its function as the divine messenger. It can also be depicted as either masculine or feminine, young or old (for the different *caminos* of the *orichas*, see Bolívar Aróstegui 2005).

As I mentioned previously, in *Ocha/Ifá* it could be argued that there are two distinct kinds of divination. One refers to the current situation of the ‘client’ and, therefore, is of a relatively short reach. Its pronouncements are seen as revealing mainly events and features of the immediate *pasado, presente y futuro* of one’s *camino*; they expire, so to speak—some diviners have told me within as short a period as seven days—or they do not provide any conclusive information. The other kind of divination, which is always accompanied by a short of initiation, brings forth a more permanent relation between the ‘client’ and the oracle’s outcomes: the *signos*, the relevant *orichas*, who are usually the object of such initiations, and the various prescriptions, prohibitions, warnings and advice that follow it. It is this second kind of divination that refers to one’s *camino*, not as a fragment and at no specific point, but in its totality.

An example of a consultation with the *Ocha/Ifá* oracles

The following account will be given in order to, first, get an image of what an oracular consultation involves in *Ocha/Ifá*, and, second, to demonstrate what kind of relations are instantiated, even if other-than-human entities are not brought into a direct relation with the ‘client’ of divination. The ‘client’ in this case is myself and it occurred in the last couple of months of my fieldwork. Although I had previously witnessed a series of consultations (mainly simple ones but also those which were part of propitiatory rituals and initiations), it was only in the latter stages of my fieldwork that I decided to consult the oracles on my own behalf, and this was for various reasons: one was that witnessing the consultations of others, along with talking to diviners, was enough for me to obtain a good idea of how divination worked, especially with people who were somehow more ‘naturally’ part of the context in which the oracles participate and also create. Another reason, perhaps the most prevalent, but also indirectly linked to the previous, was that I felt that a relatively large degree of trust should exist between me—the ‘client’—and the diviner. The reason I am giving an account of a consultation that was directed at myself, is, firstly, that it was one of the few for which I had a more systematic record of, and, secondly, because, although the ritual prescriptions involve an initiation of relations with entities and objects, they do not lead to major offerings and initiations.

This will contribute to the point I wish to make, namely, that even if the latter do not take place, the entities through divination are brought into a kind of relation with the ‘client’.

Diviners in Cuba, as it seems to be the case in many other parts of the world, are prone to accusations of ‘charlatanism’: ‘All prophets are like Cassandra. They are not believed beforehand. They are not recognized afterwards. In advance, the prophecies are incomprehensible, afterwards they are trivial’ (Ardener 2007:135). As ‘clients’ are people who by definition do not possess the ‘faculty’ (*facultad*) to communicate with the ‘beyond’,¹⁹ if they wish to do so, they depend on those who have it. The tension that always lurks is whether it is the ‘beyond’ that is actually speaking or just the persons claim of contacting it. In addition, and as the word ‘client’ implies, divination does not only involve exchange relations between humans and deities, but also among humans. It is very probable that divination not only leads to offerings or initiations, but also involves economic transactions, not so much in the consultations *per se*, but in what they might engender. It is not uncommon, in peoples’ everyday talk, to cast suspicions or accusations against the diviners as ‘impostors’ (*impostores*) or ‘speculators’ (*especuladores*). Nevertheless, it is not the system of divination as a whole that is criticized, but particular individuals and their ‘false’ (*falsos*) pronouncements, as being juxtaposed to the ‘true’ (*verdaderos*) ones, enhancing in a way the system as a whole (cf. Evans-Pritchard 1990; Holbraad 2008c:238-241).

I, for my part, was faced with hesitations of a double nature: firstly, I had not personally accepted the divination system as a whole from which, if ‘false’ divinations were discarded, I could unconditionally embrace the pronouncements of the *orichas*; in other words, I was not only suspicious of the diviners but of the ‘beyond’ they were claiming to communicate with. Secondly, I felt that my position as a foreigner, which in present-day Cuba is almost unavoidably associated with the possession of precious, and in greatly lacking, hard currency, would be a very good reason for the oracles’ outcomes to point to further ritual actions that would involve large, or at least repetitive, transactions of money. As very few things in Cuba have a

¹⁹ At least in the ritualized context of employing the oracles; practice which requires, among others, a relatively long experience, technical skill and full initiation under the protection of an *oricha* and/or *Ifá*, which confers the person the right and the consecrated objects that serve as oracles.

fixed price, especially between what Cubans and foreigners pay, rituals conducted for the latter always have a ‘foreigners’ price’, where major initiations might cost thousands of dollars. I simply was not prepared, not only financially, but above all psychologically to enter into such kinds of commitments. It was only at the end of my fieldwork, and after having made friends with some of my informants, who had come to see me not as a typical *yuma* (‘foreigner’) and me to see them not as typical *yuma*-seekers, that I asked for a consultation.

One of these, was with Angelito, a white *santero* in his early seventies, who, as he told me, had grown up with, and been initiated from a very young age by ‘Africans’, meaning not only people ‘of colour’ (*de color*), but ones who consciously followed an ‘African’ way of life, through practicing Afro-Cuban religious traditions, and especially, in this case, *Santería*. Having previously arranged for a consultation, I had told Angelito that there was not a particular or pressing issue that I wished to acquire advice on, but in general whether I had chosen the right ‘path’ as far as my studies and fieldwork were concerned. This is initially an important ‘opening’ of any consultation with the *Ocha/Ifá* oracles, namely, that the ‘client’ will bring to it some kind of issue or problem to be explored. Nevertheless, it is the oracle which finally decides whether there is actually an issue or not, and the possible actions (not necessarily of a ritual nature) that should be taken in order to deal with it. The most common case is that there is a kind of problem, just from the mere fact that the ‘client’ is seeking advice from the oracles, and one of the most crucial things to fathom out through divination, is whether the issue is related to the deities and, if it is, with which particular deities and in what way.

Angelito, being a *santero*, employs the *dilogún* oracle, which consists of a set of 16 cowrie shells (*caracoles*). These shells ‘belong’ to the *oricha Eleguá*, who acts as the generic *oricha* of divination in *Ocha*, just as *Orula* does for *Ifá*. Angelito knows very well which entities are to be invoked in the consultation, but he still has to acquire some more specific information about the ‘client’, so that the entities will be directed to him. Every person in *Ocha/Ifá* cosmology is born with a personal deity, called *Eledá*, who is said to reside in his or her ‘head’ (*orí*). In the *orí* it is thought that the most ‘individual’ essence of the person resides, and in which from conception, his or her *destino* or *camino* is inscribed. Nevertheless, as soon as the

person is born destiny is thought to be forgotten, thus creating the need to be reminded of it. This is what divination is supposed to be doing; helping people remember their destiny, which is ‘inside’, yet forgotten. Angelito, in his *moyubas* (opening chants) will mention my name so that the entities recognize for whom the divination is aimed for. He tells me that my first name is not enough, that we should ‘particularize’ (*particularizar*) it a bit more. He asks me the date of my birth. He then takes a calendar which details the days dedicated to Catholic saints and names. Apparently, my date of birth, fifth of February, corresponds to Agueda (female) and Felipe (male). Thus, my name to be invoked becomes Aguedo (making it male, although it does not exist as such) Felipe Anastasio, and then, in a slightly confused mumble, my surname, Panagiotopoulos. Angelito, begins with the *moyubas*, which are in Yoruba and, therefore, I am unable to grasp them, recognizing only Cuban names (deceased ritual ancestors of Angelito), names of *orichas* and every now and then ‘Aguedo Felipe Anastasio’. He then takes the cowrie shells with both his hands and holds them touching my forehead and begins invoking my *Eledá* (he pronounces my extended name again). He touches both my hands with the *caracoles* saying *ocharéo*. I am told to reply *adaché* (this means something like ‘amen’, Angelito explains) and he continues with the *moyubas* and pronounces my full name again.

After invoking the relevant entities in the *moyubas* the *dilogún* is cast on the mat. The procedure basically involves to ‘taking out’ (*sacar*) the relevant oracular ‘sign’. In the *dilogún*, this is achieved by casting the 16 cowrie shells on the mat in one throw, with the possibility of each one falling in a concave or ‘mouth-down’ (*bocabajo*) or convex or ‘mouth-up’ (*bocarrriba*) position. There are in total 16 possible outcomes, which make up the 16 principal *signos*, and provided that the *dilogún* is cast twice, offering in that way a double *signo*, it gives a combination of 256 possible *signos*; something similar occurs with the *Ifá* oracle, although the objects involved are different (see Holbraad 2008c:233-235). Each *signo* contains verses in Yoruba, proverbs, aphorisms, general messages, advice and warnings, and a collection of ‘stories’ (*historias* in Spanish, *patakín* in Yoruba), which are all meant to describe the *signo* in its generic form.

Although the verses in Yoruba are said to be the most important elements of each *signo* and that it is they that ‘give birth’ to the various *patakín*, it is the latter

that provide the events which may apply to the particular divination and are the object of the diviners' 'interpretation' (*interpretación*). This is where the tension between diviner and client might arise. Interpretation occurs on many levels and it involves a kind of discernment; for example, although all *patakín* refer to mythological events and persons, including the *orichas*, to apply such myths to the 'now' of the consultation, the diviner must skilfully interpret by way of substitution and parallelisms, to whom the mythological characters correspond and what the mythological events have to say about the ones occurring to the client. This is something that depends a lot on the humans' efforts to find these correspondences without these being definitely verified by the *orichas*' immediate responses. The *orichas*' will and interest to communicate is relatively limited, as they give only generic pronouncements—the myths, the proverbs and the general messages—leaving humans to interpret them adequately and with as much context specificity as possible. Full verification of the consultation is rarely exhausted in the consultation *per se* and often occurs in the long run and is highly dependant on the subsequent actions—ritual or not—which if they lead towards the fulfilment of one's desires and general well-being, they hence 'prove' the truth of the oracular pronouncements.

Both the *dilogún* and the *Ifá* oracle contain a series of 'techniques' which lead to a more contextualized moulding of the oracular sign. These always involve methods of fathoming out from which 'tendency' (*tendencia*) or 'path' (*camino*) the *signo* 'comes' (*viene*). *Signos* are classified in two broad categories, the *signos mayores* ('elder signs') and *menores* ('younger'). The two broad 'tendencies' a *signo* might come with, are either *iré* or *osogbo*. *Iré* signifies a positive tendency and *osogbo* a negative one. In order to determine the two possible 'tendencies' a *signo* might come with, the use of a set of specific objects, called *ibo*, is required. The client holds in each hand, without the diviner knowing which, one of the *ibo*. Each is previously decided whether it will signify the *iré* or *osogbo* 'tendency'. If the *signo* that comes out falls into the category of the 'elder' ones, the left hand of the client is chosen by the diviner and the 'tendency' is revealed. The right hand is chosen if the *signo* is a 'younger' one. After this, the nature or type of either the *iré* or *osogbo* is further explored. Here, the source that brings the *iré* or *osogbo* is decided, namely,

what entities participate in and are responsible for it, as well which ones may be of help to make it happen in case of *iré*, or avoid it in case of *osogbo*.

The consultation then becomes even more individualized. The procedure is identical with that of deciding the initial *iré* or *osogbo* ‘tendency’, but now the *ibo* stand for ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answers respectively. The questions posed to the oracle which receive ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answers are of a relatively fixed character, although the human factor—namely, the diviner’s decision as to what questions to pose, might intervene. The diviner should ask the oracle the standard questions that are available; for example, if *iré* ‘comes out’, the diviner starts asking whether it is an *iré arikú* (something like a positive tendency towards death), *iré elese ocha* (a blessing from an *oricha*), *iré elese eggun* (a blessing from the dead), *iré elese obini* (a blessing coming from women), and so on, until the diviner, through the *ibo*, gets a positive answer. The same occurs in the case of *osogbo*. A similar procedure is followed to decide ‘how’ the *iré* might be achieved, quickened or strengthened or the *osogbo* avoided, delayed or smoothened, and whether they can be so to start with. This procedure ultimately decides what kind of further actions will have to be taken, whether an offering has to take place or not, ranging from minor ones to animal sacrifices, and initiations.

Having finished with the ‘technical’ part of the divination and having noted down on paper the principal *signo* and its *tendencias*, Angelito proceeds into their ‘interpretation’. The *signo* of my consultation came with the affirmative *tendencia* of *iré*, being granted by the *oricha Eleguá*:

I have to tell you that independent of your beliefs, you have done something that has granted you the charm [*simpatía*] of the saints, and you are protected although you did not ask for it [...] it is maybe out of spontaneity of the saints, not because you have actively sought them, but thanks to God, and mediated by Eleguá [...] Eleguá will help you a lot, he will guide you and your path, in the course of time and your life.

Here, I believe, the interesting points made by Angelito are that a person, independent of his or her ‘beliefs’ (which can also be understood as the conscious degree of commitment to particular practices), may win the ‘charm’ of the deities. Additionally, one’s life and its course is depicted as a ‘path’, whereby it is accompanied (in a positive way in this case) by a general divine supervision, so to

speaking—Angelito calls it God, but, crucially, as ‘mediated’ by specific deities; *Eleguá* in my case.

You are an intelligent person with big possibilities of success [...] you will have many alternatives in your life [...] in these moments you might be poor, have little, but you are rich and you do not know it [...] you have many possibilities to continue forward [...] and here comes *Eleguá* to help you and stop you before committing any error and helps you move forward successfully [...] *Eleguá*’s protection is a key [*llave*], he is the guide of the paths of all humans [...] he knows how to close the doors before those bad paths and, on the contrary, he will open the doors of triumph.

Angelito is describing in a more articulate and intelligible way what an *iré* granted by *Eleguá* implies. As he goes on, this positive affinity of mine with *Eleguá* is beginning to transform into a more intimate relation, which ends with a future possibility of becoming even more intimate by way of initiation:

This, of course, does not vanish any possibility [of something going wrong]...the saint helps, but [...] I can’t ask you to be intelligent, you are; you are objective and a realist; a materialist [*materialista*], for which *Eleguá* cannot add much [...] talk to him, ask him for things, not money nor millions, ask him for protection, health, to guide you in safe paths, without dangers [...] I can’t tell you that you are negatively enchanted [*mal encantado*]; you are positively enchanted [*bien encantado*], but in all paths of life, no matter how good they are, there are always dangers, there is jealousy which is innate in human nature [...] and material success, when it is the outcome of hard work and honestly obtained is welcome. When you have it in abundance keep it, don’t spend it badly, no matter how much money you have you may lose it in a day [...] and don’t become an ‘economical referee’ [*arbitro económico*] of your friends or lovers; always keep something for yourself, in privacy; [...] in that way you avoid problems. And, as I know that whatever you achieve will not be stolen or illicit, and that it will come from your own efforts, take care of it, enjoy one part, but keep another [...] there are people who are very capable of taking advantage of your good heart, sometimes by employing amorous seduction [...] you don’t have to be harsh neither in matters of heart nor in those of the wallet, one thing is almost parallel to the other [...]

The saints find you charming [*simpático*], the saints like you [*les simpatizas*] and you might come to like them as well [...] I won’t make you do things, or pressure you, because your own feet will lead you [*tus piés te llevarán*], maybe because of your needs in the course of time, but your *orí* is [destined] to come at the feet of the saints [*a los pies de los santos*], I don’t know how much time will pass but, *Eleguá*, invisibly, will bring you or lead you...I will do [*hacer*] you a small job [*obrita*], very simple and not expensive at all, and give you some recommendations for your good luck. In important and decisive occasions use it [...] I will not make you do despojos [ritual cleansings], neither baths with plants, neither ebbo [offerings], at least for the moment, your ebbo is called ‘water, soap and white clothes’, that’s it.

Then he became a bit more precise and told me to bathe occasionally with fresh milk and then water, to use white clothes and in general look after my appearance, to dress adequately for each occasion; to avoid red, and when I wanted to use it always combine it with white; never black or dark colours; not to eat red apples without peeling them: ‘Respect the colour red [*respeta el color rojo*]’, not to eat pumpkin,

‘respect’ it as well; that in this *signo* riches are found in (as coming from) the pumpkin; avoid red wine, it will make me look ridiculous on an important occasion; to take very good care of my teeth and trust the doctors (as it seems I do not); that one day I will come closer to the ‘religion’; to be careful not to tell big lies; to try and always maintain good relations with my father, that there will be something that will come between the two of us and it might create conflicts; to respect him. Also, that if when walking I happen to see a shell, peel or husk (all these described as *cáscara*), to take it and throw it in the bin, because on my way back I might forget about it, not see it and stumble on it, with the possibility of provoking an accident to my extremities. He went on:

Momentarily you transform into a dustman, because in this sign poverty arrives in such a degree that the rich man becomes a dustman; so, being you [the sign?], you are going to do this [throw the *cáscara* away] cleaning [in that way] your own path, so that you never reach this point [of becoming a dustman], neither out of anybody’s maliciousness nor out of your own head [actions].

Here, a very interesting point is made about one’s relation to the *signo* that ‘comes out’ in divination, and by extension, all the relevant events and entities that accompany it. *Signos* are not just prescribing paths of actions, but also potential dangers. Those which are contained in a particular *signo*, point to potentials that are somewhat related to the client. This does not mean that they will actually happen; on the contrary, having obtained such information through the *signo*, one is advised to actually try and avoid them. It is because these dangers are related to the client that he or she should make an effort to not let them be actualized. This reflects the *iré* and *osogbo* tendencies in a much broader dimension, as it were. *Signos* are just tendencies where both ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ events occur. They are potentials in relation to the client, and being such, he or she could make them happen or avoid them. In relation to that, I also find it very interesting that Angelito advises me to ‘momentarily become a dustman’, collect the *cáscara* and bin it, so as not to become in a more permanent way a poor man. But this is not the only dimension of becoming a dustman. Being seen with a negative value, the dustman also refers to taking actions that will prevent me from having a physical accident. This is added to poverty by way of complementarity or extension, as a physical accident might provoke an inability to work, and therefore a path to poverty.

Knowing already that I was involved in a relationship, Angelito asks me if my girlfriend has a sister. I reply positively and he tells me to be careful with her. That she could be the reason for unpleasant events, such as those affecting negatively my relationship with my girlfriend, even to the point of separation; that she could provoke them by cunning machinations and lies. He advises me to ask *Eleguá* for protection concerning this matter. He goes on:

As you are an erudite, and because you are interested in these things [the Afro-Cuban religions], as your studies require it, I want to give you some advice, which might not apply for the moment, but time passes and although it can't be very bad, as you are guided by Eleguá - I can't think of terrible things - you have to be careful. Be it your curiosity on one side, the affinity [referring to the fact that saints found me 'charming'] on the other, the invisible or unknown powers [*los poderes invisibles o desconocidos*] might lead you closer to the religious environment [*ambito religioso*], but you have to be a little bit careful, when it comes to a possible religious seduction [*seducción religiosa*] towards Ifá. You must be extremely careful with that; because you might turn into a slave of Ifá. Logically, Eleguá will try to avoid it, but due to your desire or necessity to come closer to these matters you might be seduced, captured, and a slave is always a slave, and you don't have to be slave to nobody. If for some Ifá is marvellous, for you it will be slavery, and this would provoke a total deviation [desvio] from your life and from what your guardian angel and God want from you; because you came on Earth for other things. I more or less translate the language of the saints [*yo mas o menos, traduzco el lenguaje de los santos*], but there are others that surpass me; you have other abilities, don't let yourself be seduced by it [*Ifá*]...The saints can help you a lot but neither for your career nor out of curiosity; in this religion you must be very careful and be very well prepared, because it wraps you like a tamal [*te envuelve como un tamal*, the latter being a Latin American recipe made with ground corn and wrapped up and boiled in maize leaves] and makes you see marvels where there are only lies.

Paths are full stones, and sometimes you stumble upon them; some are saints, and the one you stumbled upon is Eleguá. Well, we could talk and philosophize until next month, but I have to be precise.

Here is Angelito's interpretation of the *signo* being one that reveals an affinity between myself and the 'saints' without this leading to an immediate and pressuring need to go 'at the feet of the saints', that is, to get initiated. He also lets it become understood that the particular *signo* could be interpreted as a need to get initiated in *Ifá*. This is combined with me being of a curious 'nature' and the possibility of becoming 'seduced' by *Ifá*. Angelito is demonstrating a side of the relations that exist within *Ocha/Ifá*, and especially the tensions between *Ocha* and *Ifá* (see Brown 2003a). The most interesting point, I believe, he makes is that one can be favoured by the *orichas* and exactly because of this there is no need to get initiated. In other words, when one's *camino*, provided it is not intertwined with priesthood as a vocation, is lived as it was predestined in his or her *orí*, then the *orichas* are

somehow positively related with him or her. In these cases, initiations, at least major ones, look like ‘corrections’ of deviated *caminos* and not as divine predilections of an *a priori* affinity. It is the affinity that is checked through divination and sought through initiation and not the motive of the latter. In contrast to big, monotheistic religions, such as Christianity and Islam, which require an ‘either/or’ commitment with them that is exclusivist (they do not leave room, as dogmas at least, for active engagement with other religions), and which are not open to engagement through constant oracular verification. In the Afro-Cuban context, it is very often the case that initiations occur due to a previous state of discontent from the other-than-human entities, which is congruent with the occurrence of some sort of negative effect on the person’s life. Initiation is meant to throw light on and try to amend these negative effects.

He then proceeded in the ritual prescriptions that ‘came out’ from the consultation, with the use of the *ibo*. He told me to buy a bunch of green (not ripe) bananas that would be placed, firstly, in front of *Eleguá* (Angelito’s own object-deity) to ask the deity for protection and then, when the bananas went ripe, at the feet of a specific kind of tree (called *jagüey*).

Eleguá walks [*camina*] with everybody, with Yemayá, with Ochún, with Obatalá, with everybody. We shall offer him the fruits so that he doesn’t let you lose, so as to protect you from the bad predictions that other people might have with this sign, to open the doors of the right path. When the fruits are ripe we will take them at the feet of a *jagüey*. This tree has very potent roots; they expand with great power and wrap up everything in their path in order to survive.

Another prescription was to ‘prepare’ (*preparar*) or ‘make’ (*hacer*) a ‘necklace’ (*collar*) of *Eleguá*, which would serve as a ‘ticket’ (*resguardo*), ‘to seek proximity’ (*para buscar cercanía*) as much as possible. The ‘preparation’ signified that from a ‘mere’ red and black—the colours identified with *Eleguá*—necklace, it would transform into a ‘necklace of *Eleguá*’ (*collar de Eleguá*) by way of consecration. This would include a procedure of being ‘washed’ (*lavado*), importantly with sacrificial blood: ‘It is a way to have *Eleguá* near you, a point of reference and support with which you could call him and have him closer’, Angelito exclaims. What is here illuminated is that objects such as a *collar*, just as the oracle Angelito is employing, make entities such as the *orichas* become closer to the person. From a

relative state of distance *orichas*, through the consecrated objects, move to a state of relative ‘proximity’ (see Holbraad 2007b:217). Angelito goes on:

You have a path to the saint [*tiene camino de santo*, meaning that in the future I might get initiated], but Eleguá is not in a hurry, neither him nor any other saint, because it is not yet the time. But be careful with the seduction of Ifá; because within Ifá you would be a slave, and you were not born to be a slave but a king, not in the religion but in a kingdom of yours, in your career, in your studies. Now you will head to your land; this sign is very mobile, you will be a pyramid, not a precipice, not a ditch [*fosa*, also meaning ‘grave’]. Obara Meyi [the sign of the consultation] is a sign where the pyramids of Egypt were constructed. Maybe one day, I will see you in front of the pyramids and you will remember of me.

I finally ask him what kind of ‘transcendence’ (*transcendencia*) this consultation has. In this context, ‘transcendence’ means how far-reaching the pronouncements were; how much did they refer to my life, *camino*, as a whole and not just the immediate span of it. He replies somewhat laconically:

This is not an itá [a divination that occurs during initiation, where the *signos* that ‘come out’ are considered of great ‘transcendence’, namely, of a more permanent reference to the client], how can I explain it, there were not any animal sacrifices [...] I think I made a quite ample interpretation [...] I know that this paper [the notes taken down during the consultation, including the *signo*], if seen by another [diviner] might be interpreted as if you had a path to Ifá, but this is not my understanding, I do not agree with that.

He uses the *ibo* once more to see if there is anything else left to be done; nothing for the moment; ‘case closed, the conversation is complete.’ He makes the concluding *moyubas* and finally remarks: ‘Says Ifá [*dice Ifá*] that Obara Meyi coming as *iré* is light, the illumination of the saint; the light illuminates your path, so as not to fall among the mist, in confusion, the rest is there to see; *aché*.’

Objects and Myths

If one compares oracular pronouncements stemming from *muertos* and those from *orichas* it is very possible to observe two broad tendencies. The former tend to be somewhat more specific and referring to particular points of one’s *camino*. This is definitely the case with ‘alien’ *muertos* who appear in one’s life momentarily and then disappear. But also with the ‘affines’ there seems to be a potential for a heightened degree of intimacy which is actualized by way of an increase in the flow of perspectives articulated affectively and somatically. Even when ‘affine’ *muertos* reveal a more general point of view, such as a potential of the individual in, say, a professional inclination, this tends to be accompanied by the biographical

specificities of the *muerto* itself which are also revealed and have to do with the same inclinations. Such exact information will be a specific characteristic of the living ‘affine’ linked to its affinity with the *muerto*, which may be complementary—or even conflicting—with other characteristics of the same person and often actualized through his or her other ‘affines’. In the previous chapter, Carmen’s outgoing but also immature character was linked to ‘her’ gypsy *muerto*, while a more ‘feet on the ground’ potential behaviour was activated and actualized by the spirit of her grandmother. Furthermore, the oracular pronouncements of *muertos*, in their more fragmented nature, obtain a broader scope only as a gradual accumulation, in the myriads of divinatory experiences, and with an equally gradual process of acquiring a fuller ‘frame’ or ‘painting’ of the *muerto* and, by extension, the totality of them that comprise one’s *cordón espiritual*. The constitution of *muertos* is perceived and instantiated as an ongoing ontological transformation and ‘cosmogonical’ act (Espiritio Santo 2010:71), as happens with the living and along with them, where their—the *muertos*’—biographies are activated in the form of perspectives in order to give way to their *camino de muerto*, to constitute their ‘necrography’, which can thus be related to the biography of their living ‘affines’.

The perspectives given by the *orichas* have the tendency to be from the very beginning broader in scope and, as many say, more ‘transcendental’ (*trancendentales*). In this sense, the *orichas* can be said to follow the opposite direction from the *muertos*: their point of departure is the general and whole inclusive towards the more particular. Confluent with this is a movement that deities and *muertos* can be evinced to follow, which divination seems to trigger and thus ethnographically exemplify. While *muertos* seem to ‘move’ from this world to ‘the beyond’, from embodiment to disembodiment, something that depends on their interaction and communication with the living, deities like the *orichas* seem to follow the opposite direction, that is, from ‘the beyond’ to the world of humans, from disembodiment to embodiment. For both, divination is the very vehicle of such ‘motion’ (see Holbraad 2008c). In the remaining of this chapter we will see what this involves.

From a cosmological point of view, the *orichas* are seen as entities already constituted and therefore (more) given. Unlike humans, living or dead, who are said

to still ‘walk’ their *camino*, they have already ‘walked’ it in mythical space and time. This does not mean that they have ceased to exist or that they are radically separated from the human world. On the contrary, the *orichas* are said to be everywhere and perceive everything. Rather, this encompassing quality of theirs suggests that all that happens and exists *here and now* responds to and, to use the indigenous term, is ‘born’ (*nace*) from the *orichas*’ ‘given’ and already ‘walked’ *caminos*. To pre-empt my conclusions, while the living and the dead *have caminos*, the *orichas* *are* them. Indeed, whilst with *muertos*, the divinatory acts reveal at the same time their biographies, which are retained in the *muertos*’ affective memories but not previously communicated to the living, for the *orichas*, divinatory pronouncements do not so much reveal their biography as this is already known and communicated. What is revealed is which, of the already known and given divine biographies and *caminos*, corresponds to and participates in the *camino* of the individual. Seen in this light, divination seems to be an act of ‘hierophany [...] reproducing a primordial act, of repeating a mythical example’ (Eliade 1974:4). This ‘primordial act’ is what, for Eliade, constitutes ‘an original ontology’ (1974:5), an ‘archetype’ (1974:6-11) or ‘divine model’ (1974:21) that makes man ‘contemporary with the cosmogony and with the anthropogony because ritual projects him into the mythical epoch of beginning’ (1974:22). Thus, any act of ‘hierophany’ is an act of ‘repetition and participation’ (1974:34) by man to what is deemed as really real and sacred, while ‘[t]he rest of his life is passed in profane time, which is without meaning: in the state of “becoming”’ (1974:35).

In line with Eliade’s propositions, it seems that the *orichas*’ perspectives are most often instantiated in the ‘archetypal’ and ‘exemplary’ form of myths. Indeed, the myths include events of creation, the ‘birth’ of the cosmos, of the *orichas* themselves, their lives and relations among them and the cosmos, as well as events of other mythological personages—including human beings, animals, and objects from the organic and inorganic world. These ‘stories’ (*patakín*) are collected into oracular clusters coming to form separate, but ultimately interrelated, domains of mythological experience and are graphically distilled in oracular ‘signs’ (the *signos* or *oddu*). Consecrated objects play the crucial role of bringing into the divining surface, usually on the floor on a mat, the corresponding ‘sign’ of the particular

divination. It could be argued that myth posits an original and primordial unity and oneness of the world—concentrated in the ‘face’ of the creator god *Olofin* and its whole-inclusive power of *aché* (see Idowu 1962)—that is then dispersed into different acts of creation by the dissemination of *aché* into more concrete and diverse forms. Nevertheless, if this primordial ‘monotheistic’ quality is evident, it is also the case that creation myths posit the primordial value of multiplicity, as the very act of creation is inextricably linked with ‘birth’ acts and differentiation (see Goldman 2007:105-111). If the *orichas* are the first mythical ‘product’ of this differentiation, the original state of multiplicity is thus also of primordial and mythical importance, even more so as far as humans are concerned. Because divination brings forth the relations that correspond between humans and deities, it is by its inception an act of differentiation and multiplicity. Divination discerns from a cosmo-mythical totality of multiple *orichas*, *caminos*, oracular signs, stories, and in general every potential available to occur, those which refer to the particular situation and person the consultation is directed to. What is invoked in *Ocha/Ifá* divination is not the ‘one’, *Olofin*, but the many, the *orichas*. In the same vein, people directly relate to the *orichas* and not to *Olofin*, who is aloof and retired from the creative process.

It is here that Eliade’s conception of the ‘sacred’ as linked to the ‘exemplary’ starts to become quite alien to the *Ocha/Ifá* cosmology. As my final quotation of his calls for a discrimination between the sacred-as-exemplary-being and the profane-as-the-novel-becoming, in *Ocha/Ifá* the claim that in the totality of ‘signs’ and myths is (‘born’) everything that has existed, exists and will ever exist (*pasado, presente y futuro*), implies that its ‘divine models’ and ‘archetypes’ participate in and include everything; nothing is excluded from the ‘sacred’. And if there is an absolute non-distinction from ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’, there is also non-distinction between being and becoming (see Goldman 2007:112-113, 2010). In other words, because these ‘archetypal’ divine models participate frequently, if not constantly, in peoples’ lives, something that divination renders ‘actual’, there is no concept of a unique ‘myth of eternal return’ (*sensu* Eliade), since the ‘reality’ that the myths document and instantiate does not return because it has never left in the first place; it is people that return not the myths. It is ‘mythopraxis’, in Sahlin’s terms, that I believe is at issue here, not in order to prove that myths are true—this is beyond question once

divination as a whole is taken in its truth-claiming value and not as something whose truth may not hold after all (see Holbraad 2008a)—but in order to find the correspondences of ‘actual’ life to the mythical reality.

In an extremely intriguing account, Sahlins (1995), as a response to Obeyesekere’s highly critical reaction (1992) to previous publications of his (1982, 1989, 1991), describes and analyzes the perception and understanding of the Hawaiians to the arrival of Captain Cook to the islands in 1778. In brief, Sahlins’ historical hypothesis is that the Hawaiians treated Cook as (an incarnation of) their god *Lono*. According to Sahlins, they did so from the very beginning of Cook’s advent, as it coincided with the annual *Makahiki* festival dedicated to the god himself. In presenting us with very rich historical evidence and imaginative analysis, Sahlins describes how Cook’s ‘apotheosis’ was not only a result from such coincidences with the Hawaiian ritual calendar, but a complex interaction of the natives with the British. These instantiated significant parts of the Hawaiian myths and culminated into what these myths had already described as a confrontation of the local king with the god (Cook), the killing of the latter and the ascendance of the former into rule—events which were also re-enacted in the very *Makahiki* festival. Sahlins employs the word ‘mythopraxis’ (1995:93, 175, 250; see also Sahlins 1989) in order to describe this complex phenomenon of ‘synthesis of history’ (1995:93) with native cosmology, where myths do not merely pre-define reality and its perception so that they can be proven true, but reality itself unravels in such ways that it is perceived as ‘real’ because of its correspondence to myth. Myth, here, is not treated as a literary or sacred text with which reality is measured; myth becomes alive—living and lived—it is perceived, rather than just conceived (see also Gow 2001; Hocart 1952; Leenhardt 1979; Lienhardt 1990; Schrempf 1992; Scott 2007; Traube 1986; Valeri 1985).

Divination and the mythology that it brings to the surface, is not just a verbal pronouncement, a piece of information that one is then left free and alone to reflect and learn from its trans-specific and universal messages. As Holbraad has demonstrated (2008c), divinatory acts are not limited to the actual instances of consultation and, thus, cannot be separated from consequent actions that may or should be followed after the *orichas* have ‘spoken’. Divination does not reveal a state

of affairs that is superimposed on the individual in an eschatological way; it does not reveal a kind of destiny that whatever the case it is ultimately bound to occur. In other words, divination does not reveal a rigid piece of information with which people are just left to contemplate.

A central element that was revealed in my consultation with Angelito was that my *camino* had an *iré*—positive—‘tendency’. Although it was a simple consultation, meaning that the ‘transcendence’ of the *signos* ‘drawn’ was not referring to my *camino* as a whole, it revealed a certain positive disposition of the *orichas* towards me, at least up to that moment. Although Angelito offered advice and warnings that I should be mindful of, there was not any indication of a current and impending need to get initiated. Without my conscious knowledge of it—and I would add, despite my ‘disbelief’ or scepticism—the ‘saints were sympathising with me [*les simpatizas a los santos*]’ and I presumably had kept them satisfied even though I had never actively engaged in any kind of direct exchange with them through previous consultations, initiations or offerings. In essence, the *orichas* were satisfied with me and I was fulfilling my *camino*. This means that what I perceived until then as an absence of relation with the cosmos of the *orichas* was in fact a completely aligned one to such an extent that no major ritual steps were required.

On the contrary, initiations—which are meant to be decided by the oracles themselves and not by human choice—most often reveal a certain deviation from one’s *camino*, something that divination, first, reveals as a matter of fact and information and, second, compels actions in the form of obligations that are thought to realign the person with their ‘true’ *camino*; that which would make the *orichas* satisfied. As there are various degrees of initiation there are also various degrees of deviations. By way of conclusion to this chapter, I will initiate a discussion comparing the different kinds of other-than-human entities along the axis of the broad distinction between deities and spirits of the dead that I touched upon in isolation in the last three chapters and I will now try to bring together in the following ones.

Ikú lobi ocha: the dead give birth to the deities

If one were to ask what is the relation between the *orichas* and *muertos*, a very common answer that one may receive is that indeed there is a sort of connection. The fact that both kinds of entities are said to belong to ‘the beyond’ (*el mas allá*) is indicative of this. Even more precisely, one might get to hear an expression that is very widely employed: *ikú lobi ocha*. Translating the Yoruba into Spanish, most people would argue that it says ‘death gives birth to Ocha [*la muerte pare a la Ocha*]’, or ‘the dead gives birth to the saint [*el muerto pare el santo*]’, or in its plural, ‘the dead give birth to the saints [*los muertos paren los santos*].’ A looser translation which I have also come across, and verges with interpretation, is that ‘nothing exists without the dead [*sin muerto no hay nada*].’ What this expression ultimately *means* is a matter of ‘theological’ debate and it would be anthropologically futile to try and discover its ‘true’ meaning. Rather, what is interesting is that the expression is evoked as an answer to the question of the relation between *muertos* and the *orichas*.

One ethnographic fact is that as both kinds of entities are said to belong to ‘the beyond’, they somehow have a privileged point of view over human affairs that humans alone are not able to adopt unless they communicate with them. In other words, both the *orichas* and the *muertos* are involved in divination. A common interpretation that might be given to the expression is that the *orichas* themselves were once persons who lived, then died and ultimately became divinities. This might become evident in common parlance and in certain myths where some *orichas*, such as *Changó* and *Odudua* (see Díaz Fabelo 1960), are depicted as ancient Yoruba royalty figures. But then again most of the *orichas*, although they are attributed royal qualities just as their initiates (see Brown 2003a:165-286), they are not treated as historical figures in the conventional sense. Very interestingly, some *santeros* and *babalawos* have told me that there might have existed ‘real’ persons who in their lives and deaths acted as exemplary models of the divinities, meaning that their *caminos* were very akin to those of particular *orichas*. In Eliade’s terms, they were human exemplary models of the divine ones, which, during the passage of time, had their biographical specificities merged into the encompassing nature of the *orichas*. Famous *santeros* and *babalawos* are remembered in Cuba as ‘children’ of specific

orichas and with specific oracular ‘signs’ as the very personification of the latter (see, for example, Brown 2003a:62-112; Ferrer Castro and Acosta Alegre 2006).

What I believe is more pertinent is not so much the ‘historicity’ of the *orichas* as ex-humans in the conventional sense, but a common ontological thread of personhood that relates the living, the dead and the *orichas*. And this common thread is not weaved in order to just focus on an essential identity among them, but it also highlights the differences and, because of them, their potential relations. That ‘the dead give birth to the saints’ does not mean that we are dealing with a linear and homogeneous trajectory from humanity to divinity, mediated by the ‘liminality’ (see Turner 1969, Van Gennep 1960) and ambiguity of the dead. If this was the case we could expect a, phenomenological at least, similarity between highly ‘evolved’ *muertos* and the *orichas* which I was not able to trace, even if instinctively inclined to. Even if *ikú lobi ocha*, even if the *orichas* are said to be ‘senior dead’ (*muertos mayores*), even if in many *Santería* rituals the dead should be ‘fed’ by way of offerings before the *orichas*, everything pointed to the suggestion that the dead were distinct kind of entities and, thus, to isolate expressions and practices as ethnographic evidence of something more general can often be misleading.

As I mentioned in the last chapter, highly ‘evolved’ *muertos* exhibit certain characteristics which seem to suggest a radical distance from the *orichas*. In few words, highly ‘evolved’ *muertos* become distant from the world of the living while the *orichas* actively participate in it. The former lose their divinatory and perspectival capacities while the latter do not. Highly ‘evolved’ *muertos* gradually lose their biographical specificity and along with that they lose their oracular perspective for which ‘affines’ are so much praised. As their biographical memory withers away, their messages also become more de-personalized, generic and not so much referring to a particular living person; in other words, their ‘affinity’ withers as well. This withering signifies or rather suggests to the living that the *muerto* has securely entered its *camino de muerto*, has realized the ‘fact’ of death and has ‘transcended’. The *muerto* has passed through the necessary stage and condition of the ‘affine’, which involves an intensification of its biography as a way of remembering it and therefore distancing itself from it. ‘Alien’ *muertos* do not

remember their biography but are it, they re-enact it confusingly and are entrapped in it.

When *muertos* are perceived to have ‘evolved’ to a great extent, they are also said to have ‘de-materialized’. Things that previously ‘materialized’ them, such as dolls, photographs, offerings, slowly become less personalized and more generic to a category of *muertos*, such as glasses of water, candles and flowers. The *orichas* on the other hand, exhibit an excess of ‘materials’ and ‘materializations’. They are ‘fed’ with blood, they ‘speak’ through objects, when they ‘come down’ they possess their ‘children’, they reside in soup-tureens, in stones and sea-shells. At the same time, aspects of their biographies are ‘frozen’ in the form of myths and they, in turn, when manipulated through divination are said to explain everything. From the point of view of highly ‘evolved’ *muertos* this would pose an antinomy, making them retrocede to the initial steps of their ‘becoming’ *muertos*. For the *orichas* it does not, because they have ‘othered’ themselves to such a degree that their biographies do not put them at risk of confusing their present ontological status as divinities. They have distanced themselves enough so that when humans ask for their help and advice they offer their biographies unchanged in the form of myths and oracular signs. Residing in no particular body, their ‘view from afar’ is encompassing and, thus, in order to exchange it with the world of humans, they are able to transfer it to a multiplicity of ‘things’ and ‘bodies’ that ‘belong’ to them. As we shall see in the following chapters, it is humans who may change their perspectives and their own selves in order to ‘interpret’ them; it is not so much that myths illuminate reality but, the other way round: reality illuminates the myths.

CHAPTER 5

IMMANENCE AND TRANSCENDENCE the space and direction of the entities and their perspectives

Up to now, I have tried to lay the ground towards a relatively untrodden path of ethnographic description of the various and most popular forms of Afro-Cuban religiosity; one which does not take for granted either the boundaries that might be observed to make them appear as distinct ‘traditions’, nor their reputed inherently ‘syncretic’ character. With this in mind, I have also tried to resist as much as possible, a direct reference to distinct religious traditions from the outset. Although each of the last three chapters was concerned with the traditions of *Palo Monte*, *Espiritismo* and *Ocha/Ifá* respectively, I ventured to engage my argument and description of them as fields of knowledge and practice, which specialize in dealing and relating with different kinds of other-than-human entities. I will try to go a step further, moving beyond engaging with just the different kinds of entities to exploring how we can potentially bring them together in their interrelations. A neat classification of the three religious traditions into an organic whole is beyond the scope of this thesis, and furthermore I suspect that it might prove theoretically perilous to force the ethnography into a clearly structured whole. Yet, and to some extent, this is not only unavoidable but, if it provides useful comparative insights, also welcome. How, for example, can one account for an often repeated comment made by initiates that what we are dealing with as distinct religious traditions are essentially and ultimately the same thing, that they can all be grouped and, verbally at least, merged under the generic and singular term of *la religión* (‘the religion’) or *el mas allá* (‘the beyond’), while at the same time be treated as clearly distinct?

In engaging with this question so far, my strategy has been directed towards an effort to come to terms with, mainly ethnographically, what might be, loosely and heuristically, called ‘other-than-human entities’—although I find the term far from adequate, especially in a context where these entities seem to maintain, to various degrees and ways, their ‘humanity’. What seems particularly interesting is that other-than-human entities participate in human affairs in a very intimate manner. This

element of participation is very much instantiated in events of divination, where a kind of communication between them and humans is achieved and brought into existence. Far more than this, divination, and its inherent communicative and perspectival features, is an essential part of bringing these entities into existence. In other words, forms of divination, in a sense, *are* the instantiations of entities, just as oracles—whether persons or objects, or both—are said *to be* the entities or, at the very least, the means through which they ‘speak’.

As I mentioned in the Introduction, very few efforts have been made to treat the various Afro-Cuban religious traditions comparatively or on an equal basis. Perhaps, this has to do with the tendency to treat them as traditions in the first place and, secondly, as ones that are inherently ‘syncretic’, that is, open to ‘foreign’ influences by way of assimilating them into their general cosmological background. ‘Syncretism’ in this case is a process, conscious or not, active or passive, of merging apparent differences into similarities, obliterating, in that way, the former or making the latter appear as epiphenomena of profound differences that have been forced historically to coexist. However, as my approach has implied so far, we might as well bring to the fore in more detail *what* these other-than-human entities are and explore in more depth their differences and similarities, rather than almost anxiously avoid them, mention them axiomatically or take them for granted. This would be, I believe, counter-intuitive to the Afro-Cuban ethnography itself, which seems to suggest that as long as these other-than-human entities participate actively in the lives of humans, they might not be a stable state of being, rigidly secured in the beyond, but a deeply transforming and transformative kind of agency, as much in the beyond as in the world of the living.

In the discussion that follows, I engage with several approaches that are closer to my own and try to explore their potentials as well as limits so as to start bringing to the surface more explicitly the comparisons this thesis has set out to make. Commencing with Palmié’s promising venture to compare *Palo* and *Ocha*, I proceed with Holbraad’s ethnographic conception of ‘immanence and transcendence’ and propose its usefulness when it comes to comparing the various kinds of other-than-human entities, and not just the *orichas*, with which Holbraad deals. I, thus, extend his ‘model’ of immanence and transcendence to entities like the

muertos—something that Espirito Santo touches upon when dealing with them through *Espiritismo*—and venture to build a more encompassing ‘model’. I do not intend to argue that this dissolves the differences among the various kinds of entities but, on the contrary, that it is part of creating them. I, thus, venture to follow the threads I alluded to in chapter 1, where I mentioned, first, Turner and, then, Horton in order to bring forth the notion of ‘path’ (*camino*), as including specific points in one’s life, as well as involving a more general and encompassing direction or potential that ‘reveals’ its whole flow.

As I hope I have managed to demonstrate ethnographically in the previous chapters, entities like the *muertos* tend to participate in and reveal the former (specific points of one’s *camino*), while entities like the *orichas*, the latter (the whole *camino*). I propose that engaging with the category of ‘immanence and transcendence’, they may afford us with a clearer understanding of this phenomenon and account for the complex ways the various other-than-human entities interrelate and may all participate in and forge one’s *camino*. The word *camino* (from the verb *caminar*, meaning ‘walk’), as I will try to show and utilizing Holbraad’s ideas, involves a notion of ‘motion’. Divination, by relating humans and these entities, puts into motion both sides; thus, immanence and transcendence may be the very instantiation of these ‘motions’ as well as the ‘space’ in which the various *caminos* intersect, ‘cross’ each other, and are brought into relation to show how one is constitutive of the other. If this is the case, and if divination brings to the surface these various kinds of perspectives of humans and non-humans, then it also might be useful to explore the possibility of Cuban divination being a particular kind ‘perspectivism’—the subject matter of the sixth and last chapter.

Wizards and... their discourses

One of the few attempts to compare different traditions as part of a single ethnographic whole has been made by Stephan Palmié, especially in the second chapter of his book *Wizards and Scientists*, titled ‘Genealogies of Morality: the Afro-Cuban *nganga* as wage laborer, slave and maroon’ (2002:159-200). Although his main ethnographic concern appears to be *Palo Monte*, and especially its all-important ritual object, the *nganga* with its *nfumbi*, he also argues that it cannot be treated

separately from *Ocha* and, although extremely briefly mentioned, *Espiritismo*. To begin with, Palmié initiates an interesting discussion which places the emphasis on the Afro-Cuban religious traditions as realms of an alternative kind of ‘discourse’ (2002:162) or, else, ‘language of practice’ (2002:191), that comments ‘on morality of human-divine interaction [...] as linked to more generalized images of sociality arising out of specific historical experiences’ (2002:162). On the one hand, we are presented with *Ocha* and its deities—the *orichas*—and, on the other, with *Palo* and the *nganga* which essentially contains the spirit of a dead person—the *nfumbi*—albeit, in a very ‘material’ way as its human remains are placed in it. Thus, and as I have also tried to emphasize, an important distinction exists in the ‘nature’ of other-than-human entities pertaining in *Ocha* and *Palo*, in the sense that the former deals with deities and the latter with the dead.

This distinction corresponds to the distinctions existing between the two on various other levels, such as rituals, initiations and consecrated objects, which, according to Palmié, consist of the means or ‘techniques of spatial and temporal segregation of matters palo and ocha’ (2002:163). All these diverse ‘techniques’ are ultimately linked to this broader distinction between *orichas* and *muertos-as-nfumbi* which are related, but in a fundamentally incompatible way (2002:163), as it will be shortly demonstrated. Herein lie the ‘less clearly articulated but nonetheless powerful notions about the moral implications of interacting with them’ (2002:163). Consequently, *Ocha* and *Palo* and their respective entities are, firstly, historically and unavoidably related and, secondly, the relation is oppositional and dichotomous. Why, according to Palmié, is this so?

Muertos in general, from the *Ocha* point of view, are an ambiguous category of entities. Apart from those who are deceased members of the ritual family and who are somewhat appeased through chants and offerings, *Ocha* does not create any direct and intimate relations with the dead. Indeed, while there is an overwhelming wealth of practices relating to the *orichas*, through divinations, initiations and offerings, *Ocha* displays a relative poverty, indifference and even, as Palmié argues, fear towards the *muertos*. This is particularly so with those *muertos* that *Palo* engages with, that is, ‘alien’ *muertos*, who ‘are regarded, not only as morally ambivalent, but as potentially malignant’ (2002:165). In my chapter which deals

partially with *Palo* (chapter 2), I have tried to explain who these ‘alien’ *muertos* might typically be. Their ‘liminal’ biography creates a vulnerable ‘necrography’, so to speak, that might lead them—or ‘lure’ them, as it is often said—into the *nganga* of a *palero* and transform them into *nfumbi*. To become an *nfumbi* is seen as a ‘pact’ in which the *palero*’s desires prevail. The relation between the two is, thus, very often depicted as one of a kind of domination and, I agree with Palmié, as one in which ‘human agency is the key’ (2002:167). All these factors contribute to the image of *Palo* as being essentially involved in ‘witchcraft’ (*brujería*) or magic. On the other hand, as I have tried to show too, people relate to the *orichas* in a much more reciprocal way (2002:166), and the image created is one of ‘enduring moral relationship[s]’ (2002:166), of a religion ‘proper’. Seen in this way, *Ocha* and *Palo* are related through a set of oppositions ‘echoing conventional social constructions of nature [*Palo*] and culture [*Ocha*]’ (2002:164). As Palmié puts it:

If ocha tends to be represented as imposing a civilizing process on an unruly world whose powers are made to enter domestic ritual space (*ilé ocha* or *casa de santo* – i.e. house of the gods) as divine kings, palo prescribes an obverse directionality. It notionally leads ritual actors out of the human oikos and into physically as well as morally unsocialized terrain. Manipulating a *nganga* is, quite literally, an errand into the wilderness (2002:171).

Initiation in *Ocha* results in people being ‘born’ as ‘children’ of the *orichas*, while the *palero* appropriates the *muerto*, just as a master his slave. Ultimately, according to Palmié, this reflects ‘New World histories of violence and dehumanization, histories centering around the consumption of commodified human beings by a plantation economy based on slavery’ (2002:174). The *nfumbi*, thus, becomes a sort of slave or wage labourer and is part of an (historical) experience where persons become objects (slaves or wage labourers) and objects become persons (*nganga*, human remains). If *Ocha* creates ‘a Maussian image of gift exchange’, for *Palo*, it is best to apply ‘Marxist notions of social relations mediated by the transaction of commodities’ (2002:173). Palmié builds up a chain of homologous oppositions along the axis of the tense relations between the two traditions: *Ocha*: *Palo* :: culture: nature :: religion: magic :: reciprocity and morality (Mauss): appropriation and objectification (Marx), and within *Palo*, *palero*: *nfumbi* :: master: slave/wage labourer. This last one proves to be very dynamic and one of tension, as therein lies a ‘historically cogent twist’, namely, the ‘possibility of revolt’ (2002:176); the slave-

nfumbi turning against the master-*palero* and reversing in a vengeful way the relationship:

If treated improperly, *ngangas* may be rendered ineffective. But they may also turn against their owners, consuming their persons in a phantasmagoric transformation of the Hegelian image of the dialectics of dependence between master and slave [...] a deadly struggle to wrest control over one's human subjectivity by depriving others of it (2002:176-177).

All these oppositions, Palmié says, basically, and on the level of 'a division of cultic labor' (2002:191), tend to work in *Ocha's* favour (2002:193). In addition, the aforementioned oppositions are not absolute but relative (2002:194), and here Palmié inserts in his historical dialectics 'the catalytic effect of spiritism' (2002:192):

Defining a generalized scheme of progressive evolution in the afterlife, Kardecian spiritism may have contributed to easing the intellectual integration of heterogeneous conceptions about the dead in the two major Afro-Cuban religious traditions. For it offered the concept of a moral continuum along which *nfumbi*, alien muertos, the ancestral and priestly dead of *regla ocha*, and even the *oricha* themselves became classifiable as specimens of more or less obscure or enlightened stages in the ontogeny of numinous entities. For many a practitioner, elements of spiritist doctrine nowadays function as a kind of euhemeristic glue that holds his or her individual belief system together (2002:192.).

What Palmié is describing may indeed make sense to those who have been dealing with the Afro-Cuban religious traditions or similar ones in the New World, especially with a strong 'African' presence.²⁰ It is indeed very common to perceive an idea of *Ocha* being treated as a religion proper and as standing in stark contrast to *Palo*, which is often treated as *brujería*, an image heavily imbued with moral claims, as Palmié shows. It is also very common to observe a profound difference between the two traditions as far as the entities they are engaging with are concerned. Indeed, and as Palmié claims, with the *orichas*, relations of reciprocity seem to prevail, whereas with the *nfumbi*, ones of appropriation structured around the prevalence of the *palero's* desires (through 'coercion' and 'commission', Palmié 2002:199). Yet, as he also warns, this has been more than anything a matter of discourses. Just as *Palo* can be seen as a discourse on human objectification and alienation, profoundly marked by the historical experience of slavery, *Ocha* has adopted a vocabulary that both reflects and creates its moral 'dominion' over *Palo*, not because it is unfamiliar with the 'dark' issues of *Palo* (in fact, as Palmié argues, similar phenomena can be traced

²⁰ See, for example, Bastide 2006; Brown 1986; Brown and Bick 1987; Brown 2001; Claudine and Bellegrade-Smith 2006; Dayan 1998; Espirito Santo 2010; Hess 1989, 1990, 1991; Johnson 2002; Knippner 1987.

within *Ocha*, such as *brujería*, or the *orichas* being vengeful) but *Ocha*, in the game of social control and power, both among the ‘division of cultic labour’ and the priests (see also Brown 2003a) and between them and the broader Cuban society through its history (see also Ayorinde 2004), has managed to hide and even project them, at least on a discursive level, to *Palo*.

I will hereby mention those points of Palmié that I find useful for my argument and those which I find problematic. I begin with the former. As mentioned before, Palmié initiates a dialogue between different Afro-Cuban traditions (*Ocha* and *Palo*), something which is still at an embryonic stage, at least in terms of one that goes beyond purely descriptive and, thus, taken for granted comparisons. Summarising briefly, his is a valuable attempt to overcome both ‘purist’ and ‘syncretistic’ readings of these phenomena. Even more interestingly, in seeking relations between putatively distinct religious traditions he is not led to explicitly conclude that they are related because they are ultimately the same. On the contrary, he argues that their relation is one of ‘crass opposition’ (2002:165). This, I believe, affords us with a much richer view of relations in general, one that is not limited to a quest for identity but expands towards a quest for alterity as well, the latter, in the case of *Ocha* and *Palo*, being constitutive of their relation, according to Palmié.

A second point I find useful is that, in the effort to come to terms with those differential relations between the two Afro-Cuban traditions, he places an initial emphasis on the kinds of other-than-human entities that each tradition deals with. He, thus, identifies a broad distinction that the present thesis also takes seriously, that between deities—the *orichas*—and *muertos* and how people relate with each. This last point is, as I have been arguing too, a crucial one because it views these traditions in less essentialist terms and, rather, puts an emphasis on the interactions that are instantiated among humans and other kinds of entities. A third point that I agree with is somewhat more ethnographic. This has to do with what Palmié identifies as pertaining to the domain of the *orichas* and to that of the *muertos*. As far as the former are concerned, there seems to be a predominance of reciprocity, one which furthermore acknowledges a much larger degree of agency to the deities. As for the latter, quite the opposite can be observed, that is, a relation of objectification and appropriation (or a contractual one), as Palmié puts it, in which human agency is

more prevalent. Nevertheless, such a relation is not fixed but is characterized by tension. This is the possibility of revolt of the *nfumbi* against its master, the *palero*. I will explore these notions further on in this thesis; however, I now turn to what I find problematic with Palmié's take, at least in shedding light on mine.

To begin with, and as this should be clear by now, my comparative approach includes on equal terms, not only *Ocha* and *Palo*, but also *Espiritismo*. Palmié's very brief mention of the latter leads him to hastily, in my opinion, treat it as a mere mediator between the oppositions of the other two. What initially could be construed as a qualitative difference of a kind is now turned into a difference of degrees. The differences between *Ocha* and *Palo*, *orichas* and *nfumbi*, seen as an opposition, acquire a representational, semantic and discursive character. Ultimately, Palmié is interested in the 'representations of the relation' (2002:162) between *Ocha* and *Palo*, 'a discourse on morality' (2002:162), 'theories about the nature of the relationship that humans can establish with different types of nonhuman agents' and 'images of sociality' (2002:165). But, what about 'the nature of the relationship' itself, rather than the 'theories' about it? As far as Palmié deals with the relationship between *Ocha* and *Palo*, he concludes that this is one of opposition, and one that ultimately works in *Ocha*'s favour. It is, thus, an *Ocha*-centric point of view (cf. Brown 2003a). When *Espiritismo* comes into play, things get relativized because *Espiritismo*'s *muertos* create 'a moral continuum' (2002:192) among the two extremes—*Ocha* and *Palo*—and work as 'a kind of euhemeristic glue' (2002:192) among them. A former relation of opposition between two points becomes a continuum by inserting a third point. It is interesting that this third point, serving as mediator, is a tradition that, due to its Western and Christian affiliations and deviations from them, looks a bit more familiar from the more 'Afro-exotic' *Ocha* and *Palo*.

Since Palmié is interested in the moral relations built among the three traditions, *Espiritismo* seems to acquire the role of a 'catalyst' or mediator between two previously opposed sets of practices and beliefs and the discourses generated from and about them. *Espiritismo* seems to offer a particular perspective on 'the beyond', namely, that disembodied spirits proceed from an attachment to matter to a progressive and linear de-materialization—something that, I argue, a more 'Afro-Cuban' or, even, 'African' disposition seems to be unfamiliar with or indifferent

to—that culminates with the extremely highly evolved spirits, saints, angels and, even, the unattainable status of (the Christian) God. If this premise is transposed axiomatically to account for the totality of ‘the beyond’ in the Afro-Cuban cosmos, and if indeed it is treated as a premise, then one, as Palmié seems to be arguing, would be faced with the task of allocating the different kinds of other-than-human entities within this evolutionist moral continuum. Thus, the *nfumbi* of *Palo* would find themselves at one extreme of excessive materiality, the various *muertos* in between and the *orichas*, being associated with Catholic saints, towards the other end; that of absolute dematerialization.

Such a linear ‘spiritist’ reading poses more problems than it solves both ethnographically and, hence, theoretically. Firstly, it conflates morality with the ontological status of each entity. In other words, the more material an other-than-human entity is, the more ‘immoral’. The case of the *orichas* may stand as a clear ethnographic counter-example that this is not necessarily so. The *orichas* manifest themselves and communicate with humans in a variety of ‘things’ from the organic and inorganic world, unlike many highly evolved *muertos*. Furthermore, their behaviour is definitely neither perceived as inherently benevolent nor as uniform and stable towards humans and the world in general. Secondly, the ‘spiritist’ reading would imply that the *orichas* are (‘just’) highly evolved *muertos*, that is, ex-humans who dematerialized enough so as to reach the status of divinity. Although some *orichas* are thought of as historical figures, this could by no means exhaust their ontological status and biography. What each kind of entity seems to be is equated with what each tradition is, and further to this, with the moral dispositions and worldviews of the persons who are identified with or produce a discourse about them. For all these reasons, I would argue that such a model tends to simplify the complex ethnographic reality and thus proves to be an impoverished model.

Thus, the whole edifice of Palmié although it starts with a promising emphasis on dealing with other-than-human entities finally goes past them and falls into an already too familiar analysis on religious discourses and politics. It turns a potentially ontological argument of relations and differences into an epistemological one of degrees, what Viveiros de Castro calls a ‘recent widespread sentiment against

difference which sees it as inimical to immanence, as if difference were a stigma of transcendence and alterity a harbinger of oppression’:

All difference is read as opposition and all opposition as the *absence* of a relation: “to oppose” is taken as synonymous with “to exclude” – a strange idea which I can only attribute to the guilty supposition that others conceive otherness as we do. Well, they don’t: others are “others” precisely because they have other “others” (Bird-David 1999:80).

Taking from Viveiros de Castro, this is probably a widespread but particular intellectual approach in which oppositions are initially posited in order to be subsequently demolished by showing that ‘actually’ these are only ideals (in the mind or in discourse) which ‘in reality’ are mediated by the ‘facts of life’ and relativize them; this kind of intellectual approach concludes that differences are ultimately of the same kind—nature/ontology—but of a different degree—culture/epistemology (more on this in the next chapter). On a more ethnographic level, this creates quite a lot of obstacles: firstly, the initial and useful distinction between deities and *muertos* remains somewhat shallow. If one were to explore their relations, *Espiritismo* and other-than-*nfumbi muertos* should be taken into account seriously and, up to an extent, on their own terms and not just as playing the role of the ‘mediator’. Secondly, my interest is not so much in discourses and notions of morality, but more ontological, that is, to explore in more depth what is (the indigenous definition of) the nature of these other-than-human entities and their relations with humans. This, I believe, could account in a very insightful way for the relations among different traditions with their respective entities, which the Afro-Cuban ethnography strongly suggests is not necessarily one of initial oppositions and subsequent mediations. In other words, it does not fully account for the very common phenomenon of people seeking help and advice, even to the point of initiation, of more than one of these traditions. So, rather than adopting an approach based on dialectical oppositions, I propose a more dialogical one (cf. Bakhtin 2008).

Indeed, even if Palmié does not explicitly argue so, this kind of dialectic approach concludes that differences are either resolved by way of domination (*Ocha* over *Palo*) or by way of mediation and their subsequent dissolution into a continuum (through *Espiritismo*). A dialogical take, on the other hand, is not motivated by resolving the differences neither does it conclude by dissolving them. Rather, and as Bakhtin (2008; see also Course 2010) argued for the novelty of the novel, it

preserves alterity by constructing a ‘system’ that remains open—with its ‘contradictions’, neither resolved nor dissolved—because of its inherent capacity to accommodate the multiplicity of voices and languages (‘polyphony’ and ‘heteroglossia’ respectively, in Bakhtin’s terms) that converse in equally multiple and transforming ways. Thus, *Ocha/Ifá*, *Palo* and *Espiritismo* should not be seen as ‘traditions’ which enter into relations of alliance or conflict but as ‘voices’ or, rather, ‘chronotopes’ (that is, spatiotemporal planes), to borrow another of Bakhtin’s terms (see Bakhtin 2008:84-258), when-and-where-in the ‘polyphonic’ voices and perspectives of other-than-human entities are most frequently uttered, listened to and talked back to in the divinatory contexts.

Immanence and Transcendence

What Palmié initiates ethnographically, Holbraad achieves theoretically. Although Holbraad does not explicitly adopt a comparative approach to the various traditions and their respective other-than-human entities, the analytical frame he constructs, I believe, might prove very useful when dealing with them both ethnographically and theoretically. On the one hand, Palmié builds up an ethno-historical common base of comparison, linking ‘notions’ of human-divine interaction and ‘discourses’ on morality; whereas, Holbraad delves more deeply into the human-divine interactions, detached from the otherwise ethnographically relevant discourses on morality and notions about such interactions and their socio-historical dimensions and implications. His is a more ethnographically dense account on the nature of these interactions, a venture on ‘ontology’, rather than more representational takes, as Palmié’s attempt seems to be. Therefore, in this chapter I will try to answer Palmié’s initial ethnographic questions, which are partly concerned with comparisons, utilizing Holbraad’s analytical framework, which, although not explicitly doing so himself, he yet potentially suggests. As I said previously, whilst I keep Palmié’s comparative intentions, I depart from his approach by bringing *Espiritismo*’s *muertos* on an equal level with *Ocha/Ifá* and *Palo*, and distance myself from notions and discourses on morality. I thereby adopt Holbraad’s ‘ontological’ approach by trying to extend it to all traditions.

To pre-empt my argument slightly, and, in a few words, the basis of this comparison which is explicitly laid out by Holbraad in his contribution to *Thinking Through Things* (2007b), is the category of ‘immanence and transcendence’. Such a category might initially seem too broad or vague, making it resistant to ethnographically derived definition(s) and apt only for philosophical and theological discussions.²¹ Yet, its broadness, if accompanied with ethnography, might also prove analytically useful to my own comparative preoccupations. Hopefully, in turn, the ethnographic challenge might prove equally rewarding for any possible re-conceptualization of immanence and transcendence, as I think it does in Holbraad’s venture, even though he is dealing exclusively with the *orichas* and *Ocha/Ifá* divination. If for him, immanence and transcendence acquire a very specific flavour through *Ocha/Ifá* divination, it might be the case that in seeking a comparative approach with the rest of the oracular traditions, other kinds of immanence(s) and transcendence(s) emerge, or that the other traditions can also be located within the immanence and transcendence axis he describes.

The category of immanence and transcendence is a heuristic one, a point of departure, which as will be shown, is what might seem as a theoretical lens through which the Afro-Cuban ethnography could be examined. More precisely, immanence and transcendence will be examined through the notion of *camino* in its two interconnected dimensions: first, the life-course or *camino* of humans and, second, the perspectives of the entities related to it and the simultaneous instantiation of the entities’ *caminos* through divination. Briefly put, *muertos* are ‘immanent’ and have an immanent perspective (that can slowly move towards transcendence in the case of the ‘affines’), while deities like the *orichas* are ‘transcendent’ and have a transcendental perspective (which has to be rendered ‘immanent’ up to an extent). In other words, for *muertos* immanence is the point of departure and transcendence the point of arrival, while for the *orichas* the opposite seems to hold.

Here, I am interested in looking at immanence and transcendence not as two diametrically opposed and unbridgeable dimensions, nor as being inherently ‘paradoxical’ (see below) in their relation. Instead, the ‘paradox’, in the Cuban context, arises when indeed they are taken as two opposed points and not as a

²¹ See, for example, Corten and Doran 2007; Deleuze 2001; Heidegger 2004; Jacyna 1983; Levinas 2007; Lipner 1978; Kim 1987; but, also see Ikenga-Metuh 1985.

‘distance’ which has to be traversed and directed. In order to engage with such an understanding, I mention efforts made by anthropologists such as Fenella Cannell, Mathew Engelke and Webb Keane who also deal with the ‘paradox’ of transcendence, engaging with a kind of ‘Anthropology of Christianity’ as an ‘impossible religion’, and by ultimately arguing that transcendence itself is impossible. My argument following them, wishes to contribute to this proposition and possibly go beyond it, as I will try to show that immanence as well is impossible. Thus, before presenting Holbraad’s thoughts on immanence and transcendence, I will mention how transcendence is seen as a particular ‘problem’ pertaining to specifically Christian ‘anxieties’.

Fenella Cannell, in her introduction to the edited volume *The Anthropology of Christianity* (2007), argues that there has been a relatively small amount of anthropological research on Christianity. This shortage is reflective of a tendency to treat Christianity as something homogeneous and as linked to another category understood homogeneously, that of modernity, especially in the colonial context, where both of them have been said to be imposed on local and different cultures (Cannell 2007:12). Christianity, treated as a homogeneous thing, is also frequently said to be characterized by an all-important premise, that of transcendence (2007:13), constructing in that way a ‘paradigm of Christianity as the “impossible religion”’ (2007:8); that is, a religion that postulates an absolute distance and separation of divinity from humanity that cannot or should not be ‘materially’ mediated. Cannell traces back the construction of such a ‘paradigm’. She mentions, for example, Hegel and how he made a contrast between classical, Hellenistic and Roman, religion and the Judeo-Christian one:

The many aspects of this contrast turned on the difference between a form of religion in which the divine was present in the world [classical religion] and one in which the divine was essentially thought of as belonging to a world of transcending, superior to, and radically incommensurable with the world of time and space [Judeo-Christian religion] (2007:14).

Thus, the central focus for thinking about Christianity becomes the separation of the divine from the human ‘world of time and space’ which, for Cannell, constitutes the transcendental quality of the Christian God. She cites Durkheim from his book *The Division of Labour in Society* as the continuation of Hegel’s line of thought through the social sciences

[I]t is only with Christianity that God finally goes beyond space; his kingdom is no longer of this world. The dissociation of nature and the divine becomes so complete that it even degenerates into hostility. As the same time, the nature of divinity becomes more general and abstract, for it is formed not from sensation as it was in the beginning, but from ideas (Cannell 2007:16).

An important by-product of the construction of such a transcendental God is the question of how this extreme separation can be mediated (2007:15, 18) and, having posited transcendence as God's nature, mediation—seen as a counter-point to this very transcendence but also sometimes as a 'necessary evil'—creates a series of ambiguities and tensions, not only when Christianity is compared to other traditions but also within its own 'borders' (2007:39-45). These tensions and ambiguities of the 'impossible' are what create an 'anxious' kind of transcendence, according to Keane in his epilogue to *The Anthropology of Christianity*. As with modernity, Keane argues that Christianity is preoccupied with defining the relation of the subject and the object as an opposition (2007:309), which is ultimately an impossibility; therefore the 'anxiety':

In this alignment, Christianity and modernity both seek to abstract the subject from its material entanglements in the name of freedom and authenticity. It is in this, I think, that we can see one suppressed link between modernist rationality and theology (however much the explicit claims of the latter have fallen away): the value of freedom and abstraction lies, at least in part, in their offer of transcendence. Gifts symbolic of intentions, words true to the heart, and, perhaps above all, money are transcendence's quotidian forms.

But, at the same time, I have argued that even in its most abstract and transcendent, the human subject cannot free itself from objectification. It retains a body, it continues to work on, transact, and possess objects. And it cannot even be sincere without the publicly known material forms of speech [...] As I have argued elsewhere, agents continually constitute themselves through semiotic practices that contain an irreducibly material dimension. Which also means that they cannot free themselves from the practices by which they are embedded in the world of other people. It is this irresolvable tension between abstraction and the inescapability of material and social mediations that I call the modern subject's anxious transcendence. And Christianity is an especially rich ethnographic domain for exploring the genealogies and futures of this troubled subject (2007:321-322).

The discussion I am trying to initiate and develop in this chapter in a more explicit way than the previous ones, finds also its resonances in this relatively recent effort to come anthropologically to terms with the dynamic relation that has been said to exist between the kinds and degrees of 'absence' and 'presence' in religious contexts, which are located partly in other-than-human entities. This relation is often depicted as one of tension, a problem (see Engelke 2007), especially in contexts where Christianity, often along with modernity, comes historically—almost always through

the colonial encounter—to coexist with ‘traditional’, non-Western, religious perspectives (see Bille 2010; Cannell 2007; Comaroff 1985; Engelke 2004, 2007; Keane 2007; Scott 2007). For instance, Keane, in his book *Christian Moderns: Freedom and Fetish in the Mission Encounter* (2007), gives an account of such an encounter between Christians—initially the Dutch colonizers and consequently the local converts—on the Indonesian island of Sumba, an ex-Dutch colony, and the unconverted ‘ancestral ritualists’. Initially, the encounter is set up as a ‘sharp contrast’ (2007:4), namely, between the Dutch Calvinists and the ‘fetishist’ Sumbanese, especially given the colonial context. Nevertheless, the picture becomes far more complex when one takes into account the internal divisions of Christianity, which can be traced even in a pre-colonial context, as well as a much more fluid interaction between the two extremes in a postcolonial one, where, according to Keane’s account, it has given rise to various kinds of ‘conversions’ and ‘hybrids’.

This is exactly what he articulates through the specific ethnographic Sumbanese context. More precisely, Keane illuminates the diversity within Christianity in a loose serial model. A first distinction arises between Catholicism and Protestantism, where the first is taken to be, through the lenses of the latter, less transcendental and more material. The basic ‘indicators’ of transcendence are taken to be words, language in general, and objects: ‘Good Protestants pray with their eyes shut. Catholics, by contrast, do so with open eyes. Why? So they can read the words of their prayer books instead of speaking from within’ (2007:2). This contrast can be witnessed to its extreme by Engelke’s account on the Masowe Apostolics in South Africa, described as ‘the Christians who don’t read the Bible’ (2004, 2007), to the point of making one of their contemporary prophets exclaim that the pages of the Bible could even serve as toilet paper! Both Keane and Engelke come to terms with how particular Christian groups articulate a ‘correct’ kind and degree of presence of the divine that is ultimately transcendent. This heavily relies on what these groups ascribe agency to. The divine can be made present through various ‘things’, such as words, texts, bodies, objects, rituals, institutions, architecture, food, and so on. By ascribing agency to these ‘things’ people recognize not only a particular agency for the divine but also for themselves. A more transcendentalist view of the divine dematerializes it by negating the agency of objects, even if, in Engelke’s case, these

are intimately and traditionally linked to it, as the Bible is. This process limits the agency of the divine to less ‘material’—but still material—manifestations such as words and ritual speech in particular, and at the same time attributes more agency to humans.

Keane draws from Latour (1993) and from what the latter calls ‘purification’, which although held as an ideal is always bound to actually create new hybrids as pure transcendence, dematerialization, and pure interiority cannot be achieved; it has to be objectified, shared and performed in one way or another. The divine is, thus, transcendental only in reference and when compared to other notions of it. In Keane’s account, the Calvinists construct their own God and oppose it to other Protestant groups, other Christians, such as the Catholics, and the fetishist ancestral ritualists who stand—not in absolute but in comparative and discursive terms—at the other end, as their notion of the divine has granted agency to a plurality of ‘things’. The main analytical tool is power relationships and what Keane and Engelke call ‘semiotic ideology’, a discourse that mainly through language itself creates the ‘right’ kind of agency and transcendence. Although they take into account cosmological and ontological aspects of these groups, I cannot help but see a predominance of the ‘divine’ and its tension between transcendence and immanence as ultimately a constructivist approach; one that is constructed in an ideological struggle that moralizes the ‘self’ and the ‘other’, and uses performative skills so that everybody can witness the ‘truth’ that has been previously constructed. Palmié’s approach seems to be closer to those mentioned above. In continuation, I present how immanence and transcendence acquire quite a different flavour in Afro-Cuban divination, commencing with Holbraad’s views on them.

Immanence and Transcendence of deities: the *orichas* of *Ocha/Ifá*

Holbraad’s main concern in his contribution to *Thinking Through Things*, is a re-examination and, ultimately, a re-evaluation of the Polynesian term *mana* and its various ethnographic ‘cousins’ across the world. Without touching upon the first part of his paper, where he reviews the various approaches on ‘mana-terms’ and consequently delineates his, I will go straight to his ethnographic presentation of *mana*’s ‘Afro-Cuban cousin’ (Holbraad 2007b:201), that of *aché*. *Aché*, like *mana*, is

a ‘thing’ that appears to be multiple and excessive, transgressing boundaries that could be thought of as rigid. It is, for instance, thought of as a kind of ‘power’ that deities, people and objects might have, transfer and receive. It is *aché* that confers the ‘faculty’ (*facultad*) or ‘power’ (*poder*) to divine, having been previously ‘received’ (*recibido*) by the diviner by way of his initiation and the ‘receiving’ of the necessary ritual paraphernalia which have been ‘charged’ (*cargados*) with *aché* in their process of consecration. It is in the latter that *aché* acquires its more concrete senses, as it is, for example, with the divinatory powder—also called *aché*—*babalawos* use in order to divine. *Aché* is, thus, ‘power and powder, abstract and concrete, concept and thing’ (2007b:204) at the same time, and, more importantly, not standing in opposition, but the one ‘internally’ linked to the other, so ‘[n]o powder no power’ and ‘no power no powder’ (2007b:204); ‘each is defined in terms of the other’ (2007b:205).

He then goes on to ask ‘[w]hy do Cuban diviners consider these two concepts [power and powder] mutually constitutive while we, presumably, not’ (2007b:205). Here, he introduces the concept of ‘transference’ and claims that the connection is neither just logical or analytical nor just practical, but one that does not oppose the two. *Aché*, under such light, is ‘an indiscrete thing and a concept that literally transfers itself’ (2007b:206), and this is instantiated in terms of its efficacy. ‘So what makes powder power in Ifá?’ (2007b:207), he goes on to ask. It is here that his analysis, through the ethnography of *aché*, starts baring its efficacy in relation to my comparative approach, as he explicitly inserts the category of ‘immanence and transcendence’. *Orula*, the patron deity of *Ifá* divination, can only ‘speak’ through the consecrated objects that make up his oracle. By employing them, *Orula* ‘speaks’ by materially presenting an *oddu*-configuration or, else, an oracular sign. Thus, from a non-conversing state he is rendered conversing, through the mediation of the oracle’s power, ritually transferred in the powder:

Divinatory power, then, most crucially involves the capacity to engender what we might call ‘ontological leaps’ on the part of the deity, from transcendence to immanence or, more simply, from radical absence (the ‘beyond’) to presence (2007b:207).

This is how *orichas* and humans enter into relations. Holbraad argues that, both ethnographically and theoretically, we are faced with ‘the problem of transcendence’

(2007b:207). Without the mediating role of the *babalawos*—who possess just the right kind of power (and powder) —*Orula*, and in general the *orichas*, would ‘remain in a state of transcendence, permanently separated from humans in the ‘beyond’’ (2007b:207).

At this point, I would like to contend that this separation between the ‘beyond’ and humans is not so much referring to a kind of transcendence that signifies an absence of relations. A main ontological premise of *Ocha/Ifá* is that every person is born with their *camino* inscribed in their head. After birth, the person tends to forget this kind of primordial inscription of his or her *camino*. This is why he or she might deviate from it. For example, when a friend of mine, Leonardo, consulted the *Ifá* oracle within the context of his *mano de Orula* initiation, the oracle ‘said’ that his *camino* was one strongly linked to the world of arts. His inherent artistic abilities had been suppressed by the fact that he was ‘forced’ initially to study engineering and subsequently work in various industries. In essence, Leonardo had deviated from his *camino*, the latter not pointing to what one’s life-course actually is but what kind of potentials are the most prominent and in alignment to the constitution of Leonardo’s person. It is worth noting that these potentials are not only referring to positive ones that might be fulfilled or not; they can also be negative ones. In Leonardo’s initiation, the oracle also ‘said’ that he had the propensity to drink and that there was a danger lurking in him of becoming an alcoholic and destroying his life. Leonardo contended, in what seemed to me an ironic tone towards the oracle’s pronouncement, that ‘as a good Cuban [*como un buen Cubano*]’, he of course enjoyed a drink every now and then, but that he was not at all an excessive drinker. To this, the *babalawo* replied, in a calm but also assertive way, that Leonardo’s drinking propensity was not something that could be judged by his actual habits, but that it was a ‘tendency’ (*tendencia*) of his *signo* (of the consultation), therefore, a potential danger always present and able to be ‘activated’ (*activado*) in the future. The problem, the *babalawo* went on, was not that Leonardo actually drank, but, what for others (who did not have it in their *camino*) was not a threat, for him was a much more probable thing to occur. Leonardo’s *signo* included a mythical event where one of the characters suffered from the destructive results of his vices, although not necessarily alcohol.

The *babalawo* illuminated his reference to alcohol by revealing that in that particular *signo* the *oricha Changó* was involved and, thus, ‘spoke’. This particular *oricha*, in the Cuban context, has acquired the fame of being a womanizer, a dancer and a drinker. As drinking is a propensity of many ‘good Cubans’, the *babalawo* almost intuitively specified alcohol as the vice *par excellence*, yet the fact remained that whatever the precise vice, tragedy out of vice—having been the outcome of the mythological event—was imminent and a definitive tendency of Leonardo’s *camino*.

This also points to the suggestion that peoples’ ‘mimetic’ (cf. Kramer 1993; Taussig 1993) obligations towards their *signos* and effort to ‘live with’ (*vivir con*) them, is not limited to acting them out faithfully, but also, in the case that they ‘speak’ of negative (mythological) events, to avoid them. Thus, divination brings to light, in the form of utterances, those mythological events that are in some way related to the person. It generates knowledge of, rather than creating and constructing them out of nowhere and nothing, the significant relations of humans. This knowledge is in itself significant because in cases of deviation, people can (and should) start realigning themselves to their ‘true’ and not necessarily actual *camino*. The move from transcendence to immanence, thus, is best understood, not as a creation of relations, but as a transformation of them directed by the chosen *camino* that comes out in divination.

Returning to Holbraad’s arguments, divination goes hand in hand—actually it instantiates—the potential that humans and deities have to relate to each other and, therefore, makes *Ifá* and *Ocha* worship possible. The kind of transcendence Holbraad has in mind begins to seriously deviate from a somewhat more conventional one, where transcendence denotes a bounded entity—resembling the Western category of the person as an ‘individual’ who is also materially bounded (c.f. Carrithers *et.al.* 1985; Morris 1991), this may or not relate to other individuals, themselves seen as discrete and bounded entities as well (see Holbraad 2007b:207-208). Divination, through the powerful powder the diviner has the power to use, is vital in transforming the deities’ transcendence into embodied relations. Thus, ‘powder is the catalyst of divinatory power, i.e. the capacity to make Orula ‘come out’ and ‘speak’ through his *oddu*’ (2007b:208). And as the *babalawo* marks with his fingers the *oddu* that has ‘come out’ on the powder of the divining board, ‘[t]he extensive movement

of the *oddu* as it appears on the board, then, presupposes the intensive mobility of powder as the medium upon which it is registered' (2007b:208). As each *oddu* is conceived as a deity on its own or, alternatively, a 'path' (*camino*) of *Orula* himself, the very act of its marking on the powder constitutes it, brings it into existence by relating or, else, making it immanent. For Holbraad this has a very important implication: 'that these deities are to be thought of neither as individual entities nor as relations, but rather as *motions*' (2007b:209). This sheds a totally new light on what initially looked like transcendence:

If the *oddu* of *Orula*, as well as the *orishas* more generally, just are motions (or 'paths'), then the apparent antinomy of giving logical priority to transcendence over relation or vice-versa is resolved. In a logical universe where motion is primitive, what looks like transcendence becomes distance and what looks like relation becomes proximity. Motions through and through, the deities are never divorced from humans, stuck in the 'beyond' of transcendence – to say so would be to place limits on the logical priority of motion. Conversely, humans' relations with motile deities cannot be taken for granted, as the Melanesianist image would have it, for there is no guarantee that the deities' movement will be elicited in the right direction, as it were. The relation, then, is potential, and it is just this potential – the potential of directed movement – that *aché*-powder guarantees, as a solution to the genuine problem of the distance deities must traverse in order to be rendered present in divination (2007b:209).

According to this view, deities and their signs—the *oddu*—are 'potential relations' (2007b:211) which become actualized by divination in which, from transcendent, they become immanent. This kind of movement transforms the entities and their *oddu*:

Oddu do not simply 'travel' from the beyond of mythical transcendence to the here of the divining board, for their 'motion' is not one of a self-identical entity. As we have seen, the capacity of *oddu* to reveal themselves in divination implies a transformation [...] *oddu* can relate to 'others' just because they can 'other' themselves, inasmuch as their 'motion' from transcendence to immanence is premised on their capacity virtually to 'self-differentiate' (2007b:211).

Up to now, Holbraad has reconceptualized the notion of transcendence and immanence as best thought of as distance and proximity respectively. Secondly, the potentiality that the two might be related renders it possible for them to be seen as 'motions', where divination plays the crucial role, from being potentials to being actualized. The kind of immanence and transcendence Holbraad construes becomes even more peculiar as he warns us that, although they are best seen as proximity and distance, this should not be understood in merely spatial terms, but in 'ontological' ones (see 2007b:211). Exactly because the deities and their *oddu* transform themselves in their motion from transcendence to immanence, the latter become

ontological distance and proximity. As I understand it, this means that the kind of transcendence-as-distance we are dealing with, is one that signifies a latent yet potential relation, whilst its transformation into immanent-as-proximate signifies, or makes it a rather actualized relation—and an essential part of its actualization being the revelation of it as an oracular pronouncement. And, as he has shown elsewhere (see Holbraad 2008c), this kind of pronouncement divination actualizes and simultaneously transforms persons, and even the relations among them, ‘ontologically’. Holbraad concludes that *aché*, under these considerations, should not be conceived ‘as diversified essence but as *the premise of diversification itself*’ (2007b:213) and that *Ifá*, as well as *Ocha*, creates a vertical—hierarchical—‘cosmology’ where deities ‘can be characterized by their degree of ‘distance’ from the human world’ (2007b:215):

[T]heir ontic transformations also imply shifts in what one might call *ontological status*, since their multiple becoming is inflected hierarchically as a ‘continuum’ of relatively proximate and relatively distant ‘manifestations’ (2007b:216).

Holbraad’s notion of immanence and transcendence sounds quite unfamiliar with one that would tend to homologize and relate the pair with others that, writers such as Cannell, Keane and Engelke, have identified. In very broad terms, for the latter, transcendence tends to get homologized with spirit or immateriality, abstraction and absence, even of human relation. In contrast, immanence gravitates towards the opposite, that is, matter, concreteness and presence. When transcendence is intense, at least as an ideal, a ‘problem’ arises, in finding ways of relating to it. The solution seems to lie in the effort to neutralize the intensity or extremeness of transcendence by going against it, as it were. In other words, a highly transcendental god, who is normally absent, distant and aloof, finds its way through a path that makes it more material and present so that it can be related to and not remain an ‘impossible’ one.

Thus, the ‘anxiety’, to repeat Keane’s term, revolves around what kind of immanence should be achieved so that the general transcendence of the divine does not become too threatened or offended. Furthermore, there seems to be a constructivist approach when it comes to this sort of ‘anxiety’. To relate, by way of achieving immanence as presence and materialization, it seems to also imply an effort made and achieved essentially by humans. Whether (a) god’s immanence is

attributed to a specific object, act or utterance, it looks as if it is human agency that ultimately transfers or ascribes agency to the otherwise transcendent entity (see, for example, Gell 1998); an approach that, I believe, a large part of the academic discussion around ‘materiality’ and ‘material culture’ has often adopted (see, for example, Miller 1987, 2005). The transcendence of divinity cannot be dealt with as a distant or absent state of being that has to be rendered proximate or present in order for humans to forge a relation with it. This may lead to the constructivist view that divinity only appears from nothing and nowhere and is only *made* ‘something’ out of human desire and, even, fancy (see Latour 2010).

One thing that entities like the *orichas* suggest is that (their) transcendence does not necessarily signify absence, nor a potentiality to relate to humans as Holbraad describes, but of relating in the first place. If divination forms an integral part of their ‘motion’ from transcendence to immanence, this is not to be confused with a transformation from an absent and non-relational state to a present and relational one. Perhaps this is what Leonardo was suggesting when, after the aforementioned initiation, he told me that his *signo* of the *mano de Orula* divination ‘spoke’ of a suppressed artistic ability which should be given voice in some form and also that, although he was not a heavy drinker, he could end up being one and ruining his life. As he understood it, the first aspect of his *camino* should be actively pursued whilst the second avoided. Echoing the *babalawo*, Leonardo highlighted that both tendencies of his *signo* always existed and will exist through his life; they were integral to his very *camino*. The fact that particular *orichas* like *Changó* ‘spoke’ through the *signo* and showed ‘affinity’ to Leonardo was an indication that they—the *orichas*—would take a more active part in fulfilling his *camino*, by making the first tendency—artistic ability—happen, and ensuring the second—alcoholism—be avoided. But this ultimately depended on him, on how he would act from now on, not only to try and fulfill his *camino* on his own, but also in ‘attending to’ (*atendiendo*) his *orichas* (through offerings).

Apart from people, like Leonardo, employing their own powers, skills and intellect in order to fulfil or avoid the tendencies of their *camino*, offerings and initiations are also meant to contribute towards this direction. In a broad sense, the need to get fully initiated – something also indicated by divination – points to the fact

that the person in question has quite seriously deviated from his or her *camino*, something that the initiation itself will try to amend. Similarly, it could be argued that smaller kinds of initiation—often called ‘protections’—are just smaller deviations from one’s *camino*, and perhaps of a lesser degree or less permanent nature. On the contrary, in the case that no initiations are required, it is more than often perceived, not as a negative thing or an absence of relation with the ‘beyond’, but as the proof that one is truly fulfilling his or her *camino* and keeping the *orichas* satisfied. The *mano de Orula* initiation in general, which Leonardo underwent, is maybe one of the few exceptions as, up to my knowledge, there is no explicit necessity of a previous divination to have indicated the need to undergo it. But, I think, it being an exception is telling of the very point just made. The *mano de Orula* initiation, apart from being considered as a sort of ‘half’ initiation in *Ifá*—whereby the initiate obtains one ‘hand’ of *Orula*, whereas in full initiation one obtains the other as well—is also, and for many most importantly, the ceremony where one’s *camino* as a whole is first revealed (through a divination called *itá*), including whether one should undergo further initiations in *Ocha/Ifá* and, if yes, under which particular *orichas*’ guidance and protection. Similar sorts of ceremonies can be alternatively conducted, such as the *bajada de Orula* (the ‘bringing down of Orula’, where one does not ‘receive’ the ‘hand’ of *Orula* but just the *itá* divination) or by consulting the *Ocha*, rather than the *Ifá*, oracle, something which is often a matter of contestation between *Ocha*-centric priests and ritual houses and families and *Ifá*-centric ones (see Brown 2003a).

In what follows, I would like to explore and expand on Holbraad’s theoretical construction of the motion from transcendence to immanence that is involved in *Ocha/Ifá* divination with further ethnographic description and analysis. I shall describe such a notion of ‘motility’ (cf. Holbraad 2008c) by arguing that through it there is a process of ‘individuation’ wherein transcendent *signos* and their correspondent *orichas* that follow and ‘speak’ through them, transform into oracular and, thus, relevant and significant perspectives.

As we have already seen in chapter 4, a typical consultation with the *Ocha/Ifá* oracles involves the manipulation of consecrated objects which from a non-conversing state transform into a conversing one. In this process, the deities are

invoked to ‘come down’ and are rendered present so as to offer their perspectives. As the *orichas* do not have a definitive and unique bodily form, divination directs them to be momentarily embodied in the very oracles. Thus, objects-as-oracles become the invoked entities. This is when they are explicitly meant to ‘speak’. By doing so, their embodiment is confluent with a parallel process of individuation and discernment. Before being ‘brought down’, the *orichas* reside in a cosmological whole, which is encapsulated in the totality of the myths and ‘signs’ that constitute the *Ocha/Ifá* divinatory corpus. The very act of a particular divination, apart from invoking the right entities (such as *Orula* for *Ifá*, other *orichas* for *Ocha*, ritual ancestors of the diviner and the client’s *orí*) also ‘brings down’ one of the totality of the 256 *signos* or *oddu*. A particular *oddu* will ‘come out’, and this will correspond to the particular situation. Thus, in this instant, the potentiality embedded in transcendence is a totality that explains everything which the very act of divination invokes into immanence in the sense that it individuates and fragments it; that is, it makes it relevant to a specific person and situation.

Each *oddu*, in its turn, consists of its own ‘properties’: chants in Yoruba, aphorisms and proverbs in Spanish, specific warnings and a collection of myths or ‘stories’ (*patakín*). All these are said to describe the *oddu* in its totality. Here we are met with a further phase of individuation, again seen as the direct responsibility of the deities’ interference: the fathoming out of *iré* and *osogbo*. The process of *iré* or *osogbo* is also part of the process of individuation as every *oddu* might come with either a positive or a negative ‘tendency’. Broadly put, an *oddu* coming with an *iré*, positive tendency signifies its gravitation towards a positive outcome of the mythological events involved in it, as well as a generally positive disposition of the entities related to them towards the client of divination. The opposite occurs for an *osogbo*, negative tendency. Furthermore, and as we have already seen, once the ‘tendency’ is determined, the oracle is consulted in order to further examine its nature. The individuated entities, *signos* and their tendencies can thus be seen as a gradual embodiment of the former, standing in a necessary relation to the ‘needs’ of the specific divination. This might be broadly defined as the first phase of divination, which is followed by a second, often called ‘interpretation’ (*interpretación*). The diviner must now ‘translate’ the already selected and individuated *signos* and their

myths as much as possible making it relevant and intelligible to the client's perspective.

As the 'original' perspective of the *orichas* comes in the form of myths, which refer to their biographies and not the client's, the diviner's crucial and mediating role is to transform them into (more akin to the) 'human' (condition), but without losing their 'original' essence; their efficacy, in other words. Consequently, gradual individuation leads to the diviner coming to embody the perspectives of the deities. Through this process, more individuation may occur. For example, not all proverbs, aphorisms, warnings and advice or *patakín* will be necessarily equally relevant to a particular consultation or client. Some might stand out as more relevant; although there is always the potential that the rest may become more relevant in the future. In cases of initiation it is more probable that the totality of the *oddu*'s properties will be taken into account on an equal basis and this is congruent with the fact that the *oddu* 'drawn' in initiations are meant to follow the client in a much more permanent way than those drawn in simple consultations. In the case of the *patakín* or proverbs, unlike the more direct nature of warnings and aphorisms (for example, 'don't talk badly to your elders'), there is an extra interpretative effort by the diviner to make them more relevant to the client. Mythological characters find their correspondence to the real life situations of the client. Yet, this kind of immanence retains something of its transcendental quality. In fact, this is what *Ocha/Ifá*'s oracles are meant to offer in relation to other oracles: more transcendental yet relevant to the individual information. They do not offer predictions or revelations in the strict and concrete sense of the word. They remain somewhat broad in scope.

Ultimately, the correct interpretation of the 'signs' is not just measured by the client on the spot—in the oracular instance—but through its transcendental, that is, encompassing, reach. Furthermore, the *orichas*' perspectives are meant to be instantiated through the prescriptions and the actions following, offerings and initiations for example, and the degree to which these actions are judged to have contributed to the re-alignment of one's *camino*, the disappearance of misfortunes or their appearance and persistence in the case when oracular pronouncements and prescriptions were not followed. In other words, the individuation process that a divination might have initiated is fully consummated in all that follows it and, thus,

one could argue that the entities and their perspectives ultimately come to be embodied, passing through the oracles and the diviner, into the client. I now turn to what kind of immanence and transcendence the *muertos* can be said to have, or move through.

Immanence and Transcendence of *muertos*: ‘affines’, ‘alien’ and *nfumbi*

Espirito Santo (2009a:224-230) also utilizes Holbraad’s same contribution to *Thinking Through Things* (2007b) in order to compare, and ultimately account for the co-existence of the spirits of the dead and deities such as the *orichas*. She does so by comparing *aché*, a property of the *orichas*, and *fluido*, a property of the *muertos*. Thus, she is inevitably led to compare the kind of immanence and transcendence of the former and that of the latter. This is why, I think, looking at her conclusions is highly pertinent to the general comparisons I am trying to make.

Spirits of the dead possess *fluido*, an ‘invisible substance’ (Espirito Santo 2009a:227), that spirits have, but not in a fixed state, quantity and quality. Like the *aché* of the *orichas*, it can be blocked, passed over, diminish or increase, and this increases and diminishes accordingly the quantity and quality of information, affects and effects, such as healing, released by the spirits of the dead and handed over to the living. The latter play an important role in the flow of the spirits’ *fluido* as they help release it by ‘developing’ and ‘educating’ the dead through mediumship, offerings, ‘spiritual masses’, chants, material ‘representations’, things which are commonly said to ‘materialize’ the former. Thus, the flow of *fluido* is inseparable from a process of ‘materialization’ and, importantly, the right kind and degree of it; one is constitutive of the other—they are ‘internally’ or ‘ontologically’ linked, as Holbraad would have it and as Espirito Santo indeed suggests; there is no (onto)logical priority of one over the other.

Schematically put, when there is a flow of *fluido* both the *muertos* and the living benefit. There is a flow of perspectives, the dead describe in a fuller ‘picture’ their past lives, they let themselves be sensed; they express their wishes; the living—provided they start fulfilling the *muertos*’ wishes by previously opening their senses to their messages—obtain significant information about their own lives, their wishes are also expressed and ideally fulfilled. It is important to note that, by

obtaining information about what the dead remember of themselves (how they looked, what clothes they wore, what colours they liked, for example) the living start getting clues about how to ‘materialize’ them. For instance, if a *muerto* appears in a ‘spiritual mass’ as a woman dressed in white and holding sunflowers, there is immediately an aggregate of ‘things’-cum-clues of what, as a spirit of the dead, it remembers or likes (or likes to remember, if you like): being a woman, the colour white and the sunflowers. Although these ‘things’ can be treated as ‘materializations’ separately (for example, the sunflowers as an offering to the spirit), they can all be ‘materialized’ as a totality and more ‘literally’, as indeed the *muerto* appeared, by ‘preparing’ (*preparando*) a doll, which, in this case, would be female, dressed in white with sunflowers placed on or next to it. Whether this would be the right kind of ‘materialization’ should ideally be verified or even suggested by the *muerto* itself directly—communicating it to the living through a medium—or indirectly, by the consequent flow of *fluido* that is released and its various manifestations, such as significant information, healing effects, and so on. The opposite occurs to *fluido* if ‘materialization’ is not of the right kind or does not even take place.

Espirito Santo traces the similarities of *fluido* and *muertos* with *aché* and *orichas*. Both are concept and thing at the same time (2009a:227). Both reveal ‘potential relations’ which must be accomplished, achieved or ‘developed’, in spiritist terms, through mobilization (2009a:227). Initially, thus, it seems that *muertos*, just like *orichas*, from a state of transcendence ‘move’ to a state of immanence, from ‘beyondness’ to the world of the living. What this means is that transcendence itself is potentially bridgeable; in that it can be transcended, so to speak. But if for *aché* and the *orichas*, what looks like transcendence is actually distance and what looks like immanence is proximity, for *fluido* and the *muertos*, Espirito Santo warns us, this is not the case:

While the ‘beyond’ in *Ifá* might be conceived as a proximity to *Olofi*, the creator of all things, in *espiritismo* it consists of a spirit’s failure to integrate into a medium’s self-awareness and behavioural dispositions. In *espiritismo*, ‘beyondness’ results from the failure of socialization, and thus, activation. It is a beyondness that signals absence, rather than transcendence, and this points to a critical difference between *espiritismo* and *Ifá* (2009a:226).

Espirito Santo is alluding to the gradual—or else ‘analogic’, as she calls it, as opposed to ‘digital’ (2009a:228)—process of achieving the presence of *muertos*. A

muerto hardly appears in full and at once, but rather, through successive mediumships, both at different times and by different mediums, one starts getting a cumulative ‘frame’ of it, wherein information is constantly added. This is what ‘development’ and ‘education’ of the dead involves. In my previous, hypothetical but very indicative example of the *muerto* appearing as a woman dressed in white and holding sunflowers, let us imagine that the person to whom she is attached has ‘prepared’ a doll, with these characteristics of her. This might have happened after the *muerto* herself has, through a medium, requested such a kind of ‘materialization’. In any case, many consider the latter as a trigger, a channel or potential for the flow of perspectives coming from the *muerto*; perspectives concerning both the *muerto*’s necro/biography and that of the person she is attached to. As I see it, this kind of movement from transcendence to immanence crucially denotes an intensification of intimacy (see Tsintjilonis 2004b).

It is this kind of intimacy and its intensification that might lead the person to add more ‘things’ to the doll. For example, the *muerto* might reveal on another occasion that she likes, or liked while in life, to smoke cigars. It is very possible, then, that the next time you visit the house of the person, to see a cigar placed on the doll’s lap. Furthermore, if the person is a medium and if the *muerto* tends to ‘possess’ it (not all *muertos* do), when it does so, the person prompted by the *muerto*, or being the *muerto*, who has occupied its body, might ask for a cigar. The first time this happens is normally the reason why the cigar was put on the doll’s lap in the first place, either because the *muerto* herself asked for it or because the ‘possessed’ medium felt the urge to smoke, which amounts to the same thing, that is, something the *muerto* likes to do.

Not to gain this kind of intimacy with the *muertos* is what, for Espirito Santo, ‘beyondness’ would signify. According to her, for *Espiritismo*’s *muertos* what looks like transcendence is actually absence and what looks like immanence is presence, unlike distance and proximity respectively for the *orichas*, as Holbraad suggests. Espirito Santo, building on this difference, mentions some others that I find interesting and very familiar with the ethnography of *muertos* and deities I presented in the previous chapters.

The first is that the central point with which the *muertos*' peculiar immanence-as-presence is achieved and further developed is the medium's body, senses and affects. As Espirito Santo says:

[I]t is the medium herself, her *body-in-the-world*, rather than the *babalawo*'s markings, that displaces the 'ground' where the 'powder' sits, speaking in Holbraad's terms. She embodies this movement; she *becomes* the spirits whom she is materializing precisely via her *own* movement (2009a:229).

As *muertos* appear in and through the senses, and they do so only because they have been attached to one particular individual by way of affinity, perspectives about and from them—their biography and necrography—revolves, follows and is generated in this particular body. The case with the *orichas* is different: their 'biographies' do not come to light painstakingly, or as a surprise. Everybody knows or can know the generic characteristics, attributes, likes and dislikes, strengths and weaknesses, elements of nature, or parts of the body, for example, that each *oricha* is associated with. Equally 'given' are events that relate the *orichas* with other *orichas*, animals, plants, the creation of the cosmos and its creator, *Olofi*. All these are 'given' in the oral accounts that are collected in the *signos* (*oddu*) and particularly their 'stories' (*patakín*). 'Cosmology', in other words, in its generic form pre-exists and gives shape to the *Ochallifá* divination (see also Holbraad 2007a). Unless a *muerto* is felt through the senses nobody knows it; it is as if it did not exist. Thus, by making itself able to be sensed and articulating itself, the *muerto* seems to be coming into existence: 'Developing is not about achieving immanence at all then, but about achieving a cosmology, a world of spirits' (Espirito Santo 2009a:229). It is a 'cosmogonic' act, while the *orichas* are already born and from them are born their 'children', the humans. She concludes with a final contrast between the *orichas* and *muertos*:

Holbraad argues that *aché* should not be seen as "diversified essence but as *the premise of diversification itself*", thus, *orichas* have *aché* precisely in as much as they are able to become the various elements of nature through their motions, rather than their relations. In *espiritismo* the opposite is true: spirits have *fluido* in as much as they are able to enter into relations, and in a sense, *be* these relations, with people (2009a:229).

Compared and contrasted to the *orichas*, *muertos* in general could be initially described in negative terms as those entities which do not possess in their biographical baggage any *signos*, that is, mythological events that would account for

the most essential aspects of their biographies. Linked to that, I believe, is the predominance of the body as the vehicle *par excellence* for communication between them and the living, rather than objects serving as oracles, which predominates in the *orichas*' oracular utterances. *Muertos* are (much closer to their condition as) ex-humans, persons who used to be individuals with a specific biography and body.

Muertos are linked with the acquisition of knowledge in a seemingly more spontaneous way and of a more spontaneous nature. Although they may be invoked by the living, the space of invocation, being the body and its senses, is confined to particular points of one's *camino* and to specific persons, those who *can* sense them. An oracular outcome of the *Ocha/Ifá* divination is a concrete material configuration. The same outcome of a particular consultation, if noted down by the client, could be theoretically taken to another diviner and be rendered once again open to 'interpretation'. If deities 'speak' through material oracles, what they say, their utterances, become sorts of 'objects' as well. Their words 'come out' as a bundle of generic (shared and pre-existing; cosmological, in that sense) configurations—the *oddu*. Furthermore, once they 'speak', their words 'never fall onto the ground [*nunca caen en el suelo*]', meaning that their 'truth' always remains pertinent. People, then, start (trans)forming their lives, their *camino* in the direction of their *oddu*.

Muertos 'speak' more literally or, at least, in a more human way, through the body and its senses; their perspectives come out as affects, images, sounds, touch, moods and rarely all together and in full. Often, especially in the early stages of 'development', their messages can be so fragmented, fleeting, confusing and unintelligible, that one has to patiently wait till the spirit—through successive mediumships, 'attention' and offerings—acquires a fuller 'image'. Thus, a spirit's initial and apparent transcendence is quite different from that of the *orichas*. *Orichas* and their *oddu* 'come out' as a totality, whereby humans must fathom out, discern and particularize in order to make concrete sense of their lives. Spirits and their affective and visceral utterances come initially as fragments which slowly come together to form a whole: a spirit with its bio/necrography, which is under constant construction, in Espirito Santo's words.

In this sense, the *muertos*' words can and do 'fall onto the ground', not in the least because their truth might be misinterpreted by the living (as is the case with

those of the *orichas*), but because they may not be ‘true’ in the first place. What I refer to here as ‘true’ is not confined to whether they are deemed as such by experiential verification. This might be the case when a spirit-human relationship remains under-developed, where both the spirit and the person might ‘get it wrong’ or when a *muerto* is proven to be not an ‘affine’ but a ‘stranger’ to the person. Spirits’ words may ‘fall onto the ground’ in a broader sense; they might be applicable for very specific occasions. *Orichas* when they ‘speak’ through the *oddu*, resist this kind of ‘specificity’. If what they do is to reveal a *camino*, past, present and future, *orichas* do not ‘care’ so much about exposing otherwise significant and desirable, for the humans that is, information about the particular point (of this past, present or future) the *camino*’s potentials and tendencies actually occur. Exactly because they are potentials and tendencies they (might) have happened, are happening and will happen. *Muertos*, like humans (and the humans they themselves used to be), *have caminos*, they still ‘walk’ on them, often precariously, and get attached to the livings’ *caminos* in order to fulfil their own. Deities like the *orichas* are the *caminos*. If the *orichas* and their *signos* ‘travel’ from transcendence to immanence, *muertos* move in the opposite direction. Their starting point is immanence, yet they lack the material that is constitutive of the immanence of the living: the body. This lack makes them pertain to the ‘beyond’ by definition, but affects and memories survive the demise of the physical body, and this makes them pertain to this world as well. Their *camino* involves a movement from immanence to transcendence and this is exactly where the living affect such a movement and, thus, relate to them. Thus, the initial ‘absence’ of *muertos* is due to their excessive and too embodied presence, which calls for its gradual motion towards transcendence. Let us take the *muertos*’ *camino* (or ‘necrography’, as I have alternatively called it) and allocate to it the different kinds of *muertos* I have identified, that is, the ‘alien’, the *nfumbi* and the ‘affines’.

‘Alien’ *muertos* can be said to be the instantiation or relative crystalization of a kind of *muertos* akin to a condition that all *muertos* can initially and potentially find themselves in. Before ‘acknowledging’ and ‘developing’ a *muerto*, the relation remains latent, that is, unacknowledged and un(der)developed, putting the *muerto* in an initial position of a stranger. Yet, and as people often describe it, this state of un-

fulfilment which places them nearer to ‘alien’ *muertos*, is perceived as a weight that pulls them down to this world, rather than the beyond. Similarly, the way they relate to the living is also depicted and perceived as a sort of load that affects the living as well. ‘Alien’ *muertos* affect the latter in various negative ways, such as causing confusion, lack of clear thought, indecision, physical ailments, which, seen in terms of a *camino*, could be understood as obstacles, a loss of direction or deviation from the ‘correct’ path.

These *muertos* are said to be ‘stuck in matter’ (*apegados en la materia*), unable to forget and detach from this world, they wander aimlessly, sometimes causing misfortune by temporarily getting attached to particular individuals. The latter’s efforts are to distance them; conducting a sort of exorcism, sending them back to this worldly, aimless and hopeless wandering. People do not get to know much about their past nor their wishes, as they do not create any kind of reciprocal relations with them.

As for those who can sense them the affects produced by these *muertos* on their bodies are of a quite peculiar nature. Very often, they are sensed by default, so to speak, that is, as a presence which is characterized by absences (for an interesting discussion on ethnographic cases of ‘present absences’, see Bille 2010); absence of biographical information, absence of wishes, advice that could be deemed useful for the living, absence, in general, of a potential to enter into a dialogue, to exchange perspectives in a way that grants continuity. Equally often, this sense of absence is accompanied by a sense of ‘negativity’ or ‘negative energy’, yet, one that does not ‘belong’ to the person and, thus, its disappearance does not involve propitiatory ritual steps but expiatory ones. What was very common, when trying to fathom out how exactly these *muertos* are sensed and what the difference is to ‘affine’ ones, was that the replies were somewhat vague and they revolved around affective experiences which were not accompanied by any kind of substantial knowledge. I got the sense that ‘alien’ *muertos* were affects, often negative (such as a pain in a particular part of the body), with little or no biographical knowledge following them. Such knowledge was significantly, I believe, limited to the part of the *muerto*’s biography that made it ‘alien’ (such as its peculiar conditions of death or its liminality while in life) and hardly about the person they were attached to. In other words, they were just affects,

which are not accompanied by a sense of a potential of developing any kind of relation with them. Their ambiguity is what, I think, produced those vague answers. The answers were vague because the experiences with them were vague. 'Alien' *muertos* could be said to be just that: alien affects. 'Alien' *muertos* carry an alienated and alienating biography, which is inherited, sustained and even accentuated into their necrographies. If this kind of *muertos* is conceived as the most attached to this world and as the most 'material' ones, one could initially argue that they are the most immanent ones. Nevertheless, their immanence is of a peculiar kind and this is, I think, because although from a certain point they are seen as extremely present, entrapped in their immanence, from another, they are extremely absent as well. Theirs is a world, within this world, of extreme, immanent solitude.

So, what kind of immanence are we dealing with here? Quite a different one from that of 'affine' *muertos* and deities. These last, by establishing a channel of communication with the living, each one intensifies their presence in their own distinctive ways. The 'affine' *muertos* initiate an exchange of perspectives whereby gradually they give out information about themselves and their 'affines'. The deities offer *signos*-myths which are brought nearer, by way of a relative individuation, to the person. 'Alien' *muertos* offer exactly what makes them such: alienation. And this is what they also get back in return; and more of it. They remain in this world, yet their unrelatedness makes them complete strangers to it. The fact that they are perceived as aimlessly wandering spirits is telling. Though immanent, they have and can receive no specific direction. 'Affine' *muertos* and deities do so through divination, through bodies and objects respectively. In their turn, they give a direction (in the form of revelations, advice, warnings) to people; they constitute *caminos*. 'Alien' *muertos* do not receive and do not offer any direction and this lack of potential is what is sensed by those who can detect their very fleeting presence; their extremely intangible immanence. They obstruct *caminos*. This is where it appears a strange kind of immanence as excessively proximate but, at the same time, not intimate at all.

The initial 'alien-ness' of any *muerto* has three broad potential courses or *caminos*. One, is to remain 'alien' and keep on its path of excessive 'attachment' and immanence to this world, occasionally getting attached to living strangers who, in

their turn, will once again expiate it from their bodies and person only to make them return to their state of aimless (or *camino*-less, if you like) earthly wandering. The other, is for the *muerto* to get it right, as it were, and get attached to the right kind of person and body that will grant it ‘attention’, ‘acknowledgement’ and ‘develop’ a reciprocal relation; the latter will become its ‘affine’ and their *caminos*, in death for the former and in life for the latter, will become inextricably intertwined. Within this process, the *muerto* will undergo a complex transformation in which initially its presence becomes more intense than this of the ‘aliens’, but which is also and ultimately constitutive of and leading to its transcendence, or most commonly described, ‘spiritual evolution’, ‘ascendancy’ and ‘dematerialization’. The third possible *camino* of a *muerto* is to neither remain ‘alien’ nor transform into an ‘affine’, but to become an *nfumbi*, which I explore later on.

One thing that I always found perplexing while in fieldwork and I will hereby try to resolve *post facto*, is an apparent contradiction that constantly sprung up in my mind when comparing ‘alien’ and ‘affine’ *muertos*. On the one hand, ‘alien’ *muertos* were said to be in the lowest levels of spiritual evolution and ascendancy, if indeed there was any, while ‘affine’ *muertos* were definitively said to be in the process of ascendancy. In this sense, the former seemed more immanent, whereas the latter more transcendent or, at least, more able to transcend their immanence. On the other hand, ‘alien’ *muertos*, despite the insistence that they were more of this world and material, seemed much more absent in a certain sense and when compared to the ‘affines’. What this could possibly mean has since become one of the questions to have haunted me; the persistence of which could be paralleled to how ‘alien’ *muertos* have haunted my Cuban friends. ‘Affine’ *muertos* passed through a multiple series of what, in one way or another, was said to be their ‘materializations’ (see also Espirito Santo 2010). These ranged from very literal senses—such as dolls that ‘represented’ them, offerings, glasses of water, flowers, pictures of them (in cases where they were known), objects that the *muerto* used to be or still was attached to—to less tangible ones—such as chants, habits and behaviour (evinced and expressed through their ‘affine’) and, very importantly, the very messages transmitted to the living in the contexts of divination. ‘Alien’ *muertos*, in stark contrast, were much more ‘absent’ in this sense. No objects ‘represented’ them, they transmitted few messages (often the

‘wrong’ ones and misleading) and when they faintly made their appearance to the eyes of the mediums, offerings, chants and other utterances and acts had the sole purpose of expiating them; they were disappearing acts and words, not by annihilating their ‘existence’ and presence, but by distancing them.

I have no intentions of resolving this haunting question by arguing that the contradiction lay in the Cubans’ minds, therefore it is a native category mistake, nor by arguing *a la* Lévy-Bruhl (see Lévy-Bruhl 1926, 1966, 1975; see also Holbraad 2007b:200-201), that, although a contradiction, the Cubans might be indifferent to it, defying in this way the laws of contradiction in general. If we choose this path, of it not being a logical error, then how may we proceed? I will try to argue that the contradiction is not logical, when referring to the living Cubans, but it might be *ontological*, when referring to the dead ones. It is not just a case that says something about the living but something that the *muertos* are at pains to articulate, both to themselves and to the living. Moving from ‘alien’ *muertos* to ‘affines’, I try to expose the peculiarities of the *muertos* in general and the different kinds of them, especially in light of immanence and transcendence.

As we previously saw, ‘alien’ *muertos*’ excessive immanence and proximity to this world is accompanied by a distance and absence of intimacy in terms of their relation to the living. ‘Affine’ *muertos* are, in their various degrees, transcending and this path is harnessed by an intensification of their ‘materializations’ and relations with the living. This is not a contradiction posed by and limited to the latter, but ultimately stems from the very condition of the former. Thus, the ‘anxiety’ is not whether perspectives *about* and *from* the dead ‘affines’ (probably their ‘materialization’ *par excellence*) should be suppressed so as to let the dead go—transcend—but, quite the opposite, namely, that knowledge should flow and get materialized in order for the *muertos* to transcend. In essence, the spirits’ ‘evolution’ from immanence to transcendence is a harnessing of a *camino de muerto*, namely, a motion of the dead, becoming ‘other’ to their previous embodied self so as to relate properly—as a proper *muerto*—to the living.

The movement from immanence to transcendence of *muertos*, although involving knowledge and a realization of the fact of death, is not of an abrupt and absolute nature. Knowing that you are a *muerto* and acting like one is a process,

which also involves a kind of interplay between remembering and forgetting. Forgetting passes through a necessary process of remembering, because only by remembering the *muerto* starts to compare and ultimately contrast its present condition as dead to its previous one as alive and, thus, realizes its transformation. As Espirito Santo argues, this transformation is gradual and not automatic. It is in this sense that *muertos*, just like the living, are perceived as still having a *camino* to walk through; a *camino* of gradual disembodiment though and the acquisition of a new kind of body, which is formed by the loss of the previous human body and its individuality. If a doll is the materialization of a *muerto* this is so in apparently two contradictory yet, in the Afro-Cuban cosmos, necessary and mutually implicated ways: first, the *muerto* perceives itself in the doll or certain characteristics of it (as it is dressed and adorned with things that resemble it) and, because of this, remembers its biography. Second, the doll also stands as a contrast to the full past ‘image’ of the person while in life because, although certain aspects persist as a way of reminiscence, others have perished and been substituted by ones quite unfamiliar to its previous personhood. Instead of bones, human organs and skin it is *made* of cloth, threads and other fabrics and materials. Thus, through its ‘materialization’ in a doll, the *muerto* activates and intensifies some memories of its biography, while at the same time it realizes that these memories do not inhabit anymore the human body they once used to.

Probably the most intense kind of ‘materializing’ of the *muertos* is through the body. ‘Affine’ *muertos* are those who have been attached to a specific living human being. It is here that the dialogue between remembering and forgetting becomes more intense. Through the body of its ‘affine’, the *muerto* vividly remembers its bodily-ness and even activates its affects (as Celia’s *muerto* Tomás did through his sweat which appeared in Celia’s body while his presence was intensified; see chapter 3). Nevertheless, and this is an important task of the living, although the bodily functions activate the past capacities of the *muerto*, the ‘affine’s’ body is not the *muerto*’s and this should be made clear. The living start acquiring perspectives *about* themselves *from* their ‘affine’ *muertos* and in this process the *muerto* realizes it is dead. Thus, for the *muertos* there is always this apparently conflicting, yet constitutive of their fluid ‘being’ as *muertos*, a condition that makes

the body still *matter* (taken both as a verb and adjective) when, ideally at least, it should not.

It is in this complex and dynamic, ‘cosmogonic’ in Espirito Santo’s words, sense that the *muertos*’ initially intangible and not yet materialized presence does not constitute (their) transcendence, something which Espirito Santo rightfully points out. Nevertheless, their transformation into socialized, related, and materialized *muertos*, that is, ‘affines’, is not to be confused with a parallel transformation from absence to presence; at least not in the very strict sense of the words. Put differently, personhood survives and is not annihilated after death, not because the living humans’ imaginative agency fancifully reconstructs them out of the nothingness of their ashes and dust. Immanence, in the case of *muertos* is their point of departure and, for the ‘affines’ at least, transcendence their ‘directed motion’, their *camino*; a transformative process from the affective memories of their biography to their necrography. This process, mediated by their ‘affinity’ with the living, intensifies their oracular and perspectival propensity towards the latter and proves the very ‘material’ with which the former start to ‘dematerialize’ and transcend. Although compared to the living, the *muertos*’ perspectives are more transcendental—they view things living humans cannot; hence their significance—compared to the *orichas*, their perspectives are more immanent.

As I said before, between or besides a classificatory continuum of *muertos*, which in terms of ‘spiritual evolution’ the ‘alien’ would be at one end and the ‘affines’ occupying a range with a direction towards the other, there is a category that exhibits some very peculiar characteristics: the *nfumbi*. In certain aspects, they resemble both ‘alien’ and ‘affine’ *muertos*, and in others, they stand on their own and can, thus, provoke chaos and ‘wreak havoc’, in Palmié’s words (2002:169), to any classificatory efforts for neat categories. Nevertheless, the otherwise chaotic character of *nfumbi* may shed some light—despite the fact that they are said to be ‘dark’ (*oscuros*) and obscure things—to my engagement with immanence and transcendence. From a certain point of view, the *nfumbi* seem to stand between the broad continuum of ‘alien’ and ‘affine’ *muertos*. Before becoming one, the *nfumbi* is drawn out of the indistinct and anonymous mass of ‘alien’ *muertos*. The ambiguous state of the ‘alien’ *muertos* is transferred to the *nfumbi*, as both are perceived to be in

the lowest and most material state a *muerto* can be. In addition, the effects of both can be very similar.

As we have already seen in chapter 2, *Palo* can be seen as a field of knowledge and practice that creates a kind of intimacy with these ‘alien’ *muertos*, that other traditions actively, or not, try to avoid and exclude. The immediate question that could be posed is whether the peculiar immanence of ‘alien’ *muertos* is in any way transformed when they convert into *nfumbi*. An initial answer to this could be that by becoming an *nfumbi*, the *muerto* gets into some kind of relationship, that is, it gets socialized at least within the limited environment of the *palero* and, by extension, his clients and ritual family. As James Figarola (2006a) has argued, in *Palo*, initiations create a ritual kinship bond among people and simultaneously their *ngangas* with their *nfumbi*. As with communicating vessels, there are created ritual families among persons, among *ngangas* and among *nfumbi*, each one interconnected with the rest. Thus, what is normally excluded, in *Palo* is embraced and included. From the aimlessly wandering spirits of the dead, which are normally depicted as an anonymous sea or mass of the dead, the ‘alien’ *muerto* is singled out, its human remains exhumed, brought to the *nganga* and put to ‘work’ for the *palero*, his clients and ‘godchildren’. The *nfumbi* are not seen as transcending this world, but as very immanent to it. *Palo*, in that case, seems to defy a purist ‘spiritist’ understanding of *muertos* as necessarily evolving towards dematerialization.

In all the cases of the various other-than-human entities, we can observe that immanence and transcendence hardly ‘reveal’ anything if each is seen in isolation and as a bounded point or entity. Rather, immanence and transcendence is a ‘space’, a potential ‘path’ that has to be traversed in order to be harnessed, to be put into motion and with a specific direction (*sensu* Holbraad). If, on the other hand, entities do not have a directed motion they are perceived as either stagnant or with no specific direction, both of which are hardly fruitful conditions for a positive relation with humans, as they, as well, seek directed motion. Indeed, people most often consult the oracles and, consequently and more generally, engage with the Afro-Cuban ‘spirit-world’ when they seek a kind of direction. Different kinds of other-than-human entities reveal different aspects of such direction by also, crucially, reveal their own one.

Broadly put, *muertos* tend to move from immanence to transcendence and, provided they do so, it is then that their oracular propensities and intimacy with the living are intensified—in their becoming ‘affines’. Such a motion is not to be taken for granted and it is one and the same with the process—described as ‘education’, ‘development’ and ‘evolution’—of their ontological transformation into ‘proper’ *muertos*. The living harness their *camino* along with and in direct relation to the *muertos* harnessing their own. Normally, too much immanence is an obstacle for relations (at least seen as positive) as this can be evinced with the ‘alien’ *muertos*, who are anonymous and aimlessly wandering, with no direction, and, thus, entrapped in this world without being able to ‘other’ themselves, so that they can ‘properly’ (‘affinally’, if you like) relate to the living. But, too much transcendence is also negating relations, although perhaps without the perils of excessive immanence. This can be observed in the highly evolved *muertos* who transcend to such an extent that they lose their ‘necrographic’ significance and oracular specificity towards the living.

On the contrary, deities like the *orichas*, although ontologically secure in their transcendence, are not entrapped in it. By ‘ontologically secure’, I mean that, as entities, their *camino* has already been traversed in the mythical space and time. Their movement from transcendence to immanence although this implies certain transformations, even ontological as Holbraad argues, it does not mean that they become completely and permanently immanent. Their perspective is still transcendent—they can ‘see’ beyond specific points in one’s *camino* and beyond the specificities of time or, else, ‘past, present and future’—and that is what they are so praised for. The *nfumbi* seem to occupy a ‘strange’ position in this scheme. Being too immanent, as they derive from ‘alien’ *muertos*, their perspectives are aligned too intimately with those of their ‘owners’ (the *paleros* and their clients), yet, for those to whom they are ‘sent’ their ‘alien-ness’ is perceived as causing ‘alienating’ effects and affects.

As I have progressively adopted the word ‘perspective’ and suggested how this is instantiated through divination, in the following chapter I will deal with it much more explicitly and explore whether divination, as revealing and relating the *caminos* of the humans with those of ‘the beyond’ could be seen as a kind of ‘perspectivism’. Before doing so, I find it crucial to describe how ‘perspectivism’ has

been dealt with in anthropological theory so far, especially through the work of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro; I then consequently explore its relation to the Afro-Cuban context.

CHAPTER 6

DIVINATION AS PERSPECTIVISM

In this chapter, I will try to further develop the interpretation I initiated in the previous one, that is, attempt to account for the various kinds of other-than-human entities, not only each one in their own isolated domain, but as part of what my Cuban friends referred to as ‘the beyond’, that potentially accommodates all, yet without obliterating their distinctive natures. As I hope I have made clear by now, what brings the various kinds of entities together is partly the ethnographic fact that they can all—potentially at least—participate to varying degrees and at various points in one’s *camino*. If and when they do so, the case in which this is mostly instantiated, such as divination, not only harnesses peoples’ *camino* but also, in its multiple ways, harnesses the *caminos* of the entities themselves. The human *camino*, thus, achieves its directed motion in light of, because of, and in relation to the directed motion of the (different) other-than-human entities. If the latter’s motion is not motivated and directed, they get stuck in an aimless and stagnant ‘plane’—of excessive immanence for *muertos* and of excessive transcendence for *orichas*—and this affects accordingly the *camino* of the former. Viewed as such, ‘human’ and ‘other-than-human’ *caminos* are constitutive of and feed by each other.

By looking at the notion of ‘perspectivism’, as this has been treated anthropologically (and not philosophically), here, I will explore its potential affinities with (Afro-Cuban) divination.²² If my understanding is correct, perspectivism takes differences in points of views to be constitutive of each other, and not as arbitrarily and ‘relativistically’ co-existing. This sounds quite similar to the point I just made about the mutual constitution of ‘human’ and ‘other-than-human’ *caminos* and may, thus, suggest the affinity of the two—perspectivism and divination. It is in its perspectival dimension of ‘the beyond’ that we may trace the ‘ontological glue’ (to echo but also paraphrase Palmié; 2002:192) that holds *muertos* and *orichas* together, but does not make them alike! Before delving into the implications of this, I will try

²² For more philosophical discussions on ‘perspectivism’, see Dawson 1985; Hales and Welshon 2000; Reed 1994; Reginster 2001; Schenck 1985.

to disentangle perspectivism from its very peculiar ‘Amerindian’ and ‘animistic’ content and also engage with what one could, heuristically at least, identify as its ‘theoretical’ and ‘ethnographic’ dimensions.

From ‘animism’ to ‘perspectivism’

In the last two decades there seems to have been a returning and growing interest in engaging with the traditional category in anthropology of ‘animism’—as this was originally formulated by Tylor (1958)—and, along with that, in others, such as ‘totemism’—as this was (re)formulated by Lévi-Strauss (1964)—and ‘naturalism’.²³ The ‘debate’ most often commences with the classificatory attempt made by Descola (1996) and proceeds with the various reactions towards it. Very briefly put, Descola distinguishes societies along the basis of three broad ‘modes of identification’ (1996:87-89). First, we have ‘totemic systems’ wherein exist ‘discontinuities between natural species [which] organize, conceptually, a segmentary order delimiting social units’ (1996:87). In these systems, ‘non-humans are treated as signs’ (1996:88). Second, we have the ‘animic systems’, a mode of identification which ‘endows natural beings with human dispositions and social attributes’ (1996:87). In them, ‘non-humans are treated as the term of a relation’ (1996:88). Third and last:

Typical of western cosmologies since Plato and Aristotle, naturalism creates a specific ontological domain, a place of order and necessity where nothing happens without a reason or cause, whether originating in God (such as Spinoza’s famous ‘*Deus sive natura*’) or immanent to the fabric of the world (‘the laws of nature’) (1996:88.).

It is in this third mode that a ‘polar opposition between nature and society’ (1996:88-89) is created. Descola goes on to identify and classify accordingly different ‘modes of relation’ (1996:89-91) and ‘modes of categorization’ (1996:91-94). Permeating his argument is the desire to recast critically the categories of ‘nature’ and ‘society’ or ‘culture’, something which I do not wish to directly engage with in this thesis and, therefore, I shall omit a great part of both Descola’s effort and the reactions towards it. What I do wish to isolate from the ‘debate’ are two things: firstly, a critical stance

²³ For such a reheated interest, see Bird-David 1999; Descola 1992, 1996; Ingold 1998, 2000; Pedersen 2001; Roy and Fuku 1996; Springer 1999; Tsintjilonis 2004a:425-431; Viveiros de Castro 1998:472-474; Willerslev 2007:1-28, 181-191.

towards the neat classifications made by Descola and, secondly, his main, although critical, preoccupation with 'nature'.

As for the first, and again extremely briefly put, Descola may be criticized in that his 'modes' are ultimately models that serve to classify, understand and represent social and natural phenomena, and that these models look a lot like mental 'representations' or 'beliefs': 'In other words, despite its promise, Descola's work preserves the ontological a priori of nature by rendering animism and totemism as imaginative and imaginary reconstructions of it' (Tsintjilonis 2004a:429; for a similar critique, see also Ingold 2000:107; Latour 2009; Viveiros de Castro 1998:474). As for the second point, there seems to be an overarching correlation between, what Descola calls, 'non-humans' and 'nature'. In other words, whether we are confronted with 'totemist', 'animic' or even 'naturalist' systems (although in more negative terms), 'nature' acquires a kind of 'non-human' intentionality which plays its part in either organizing society after it ('totemism'), being organized after society ('animism') or in radical separation from society ('naturalism'). A further implication of this, as far as 'totemism' and 'animism' are concerned, is that the prototypical 'non-human' entities are very often depicted to be coming from the 'natural' domain, especially animals, as well as 'elements of nature' and plants, that play a key social role in their interaction with humans.

By moving from 'animism' to 'perspectivism', and with a specific focus on the work of Viveiros de Castro, I will try to argue that the latter seems to adequately tackle the first point, that is, criticize the former and offer a better 'theoretical' tool to work with, but has not managed with equal force to get away, ethnographically at least, from the second, that is, the strong affinity (even to the point of identification) of the 'non-human' with the 'natural' and the consequent one of the 'non-human' with the 'animal', especially, as I will show further on, with the distinction between predator and prey. I hope that my ethnography will contribute towards such direction as well as feed from the many merits of perspectivism.

Although Viveiros de Castro initiated (at least some of) us to the ethnography of the *Araweté*, an Amazonian society, as early as the beginnings of the 1990s, with the publication of his book *From the Enemy's Point of View* (1992), he explicitly and more consciously developed (following Århem; see Århem 1993, 1996) the notion of

‘Amerindian perspectivism’ some six years later. Since then, it has occupied a central role in his theoretical pursuits (see Viveiros de Castro 1998, 2004a, 2004b). Thus, and for the sake of textual economy, I commence with those latter arguments. Whereas *From the Enemy’s Point of View* deals mainly with the *Araweté* ethnography, his subsequent publications are an attempt to offer a more encompassing understanding of ‘Amazonian’ or even ‘Amerindian’ peoples. Delving into their cosmologies, he argues that they could be seen, heuristically at least, as an inversion of the Western ‘multiculturalist’ ones: theirs, in turn, are ‘multinaturalist’ (1998:469-470). This is where, in a nutshell, the idea of perspectivism takes life and is developed.

Viveiros de Castro goes on to present *what* Amerindians perceive to be ‘nonhuman’ (including deities, spirits of the dead and animals) and *what* they perceive as human. Under normal conditions, he says:

[H]umans see humans as humans, animals as animals and spirits (if they see them) as spirits; however animals (predators) and spirits see humans as animals (as prey) to the same extent that animals (as prey) see humans as spirits or as animals (predators). By the same token, animals and spirits see themselves as humans: they perceive themselves as (or become) anthropomorphic beings when they are in their own houses or villages and they experience their own habits and characteristics in the form of culture – they see their food as human food (jaguars see blood as manioc beer, vultures see the maggots in rotting meat as grilled fish, etc.), they see their bodily attributes (fur, feathers, claws, beaks etc.) as body decorations or cultural instruments, they see their social system as organized in the same way as human institutions are (with chiefs, shamans, ceremonies, exogamous moieties, etc.). This ‘to see as’ refers literally to percepts and not analogically to concepts, although in some case the emphasis is placed more on the categorical rather than on the sensory aspect of the phenomenon (1998:470).

Thus, one of the first premises of perspectivism is that nonhumans have a point of view—a perspective—just as humans do. Nevertheless, in perspectivism, nonhuman, as well as human, perspectives are treated as ‘percepts’ and not as ‘concepts’ or representations. Perspectivism, thus, on a methodological level, is an ontological and not epistemological take. Instead of hurriedly reducing nonhuman perspectives to a socio or anthropocentric analysis (this is what Descola is criticized for), it suspends interpretation for the sake of a clearer ethnographic description. Thus perspectivism, if anything else and beyond its ethnographic particularities, is a stance that aims to take seriously recurrent ethnographic practices and beliefs that seem to, in their turn, take seriously the agency and intentionality of ‘nonhumans’. It is interested in questions of ‘what’ rather than just ‘how’; what does each perspective ‘see’, rather

than just how it comes to see it as such. Viveiros de Castro is led to such an argument through the Amazonian ethnography itself. As he puts it:

In sum, animals are people, or see themselves as persons. Such a notion is virtually always associated with the idea that the manifest form of each species is a mere envelope (or 'clothing') which conceals an internal human form, usually only visible to the eyes of the particular species or to certain trans-specific beings such as shamans. This internal form is the 'soul' or 'spirit' of the animal: an intentionality or subjectivity formally identical to human consciousness, materializable, let us say, in a human bodily schema concealed behind an animal mask. At first sight then, we would have a distinction between an anthropomorphic essence of a spiritual type, common to animate beings, and a variable bodily appearance, characteristic of each individual species but which rather than being a fixed attribute is instead a changeable and removable clothing (1998:470-471).

What Viveiros de Castro implies here is that both humans and nonhumans alike have the capacity to have a point of view, although one which differs radically among different species. To have a point of view is due to a capacity common to all species, an 'intentionality or subjectivity', which is ultimately a 'human bodily schema' integral to them. The 'envelope' body, the 'animal mask', is what makes them perceive different things, to have different points of view; this is why, for example, what is blood for humans is manioc beer for jaguars. Perspectivism goes beyond this radical difference in perspectives; exactly because the external bodily form is an 'envelope', there is the possibility, under specific conditions, for a person from any species to adopt another one's point of view, instantiating a 'perspectival inversion' (1998:471). It is this inherent potentiality of perspectives-as-bodies to become other perspectives-bodies that makes perspectivism possible, where the locus is the body—nature—and not the mind—culture. This is also evinced in Amerindian mythology, where the present bodily and perspectival differences had not yet occurred:

The differentiation between 'culture' and 'nature', which Lévi-Strauss showed to be the central theme of Amerindian mythology, is not a process of differentiating the human from the animal, as in our evolutionist mythology. The original common condition of both humans and animals is not animality but rather humanity. The great mythical separation reveals not so much culture distinguishing itself from nature but rather nature distancing itself from culture: the myths tell how animals lost the qualities inherited or retained by humans [...] Humans are those who continue as they have always been: animals are ex-humans, not humans ex-animals (1998:471-472).

Consequently, the 'given' and universal factor in Amerindian perspectivism is humanity as a 'condition', while the 'made' and particular one is the body. Whatever has a potential point of view is a subject and, in this sense, is human (1998:476-477).

‘Animals see in the *same* way as we do *different* things because their bodies are different from ours’ (1998:478). Viveiros de Castro warns us that the ‘body’ here is not to be understood as ‘a synonym for distinctive substance or fixed shape’:

[I]t is an assemblage of affects or ways of being that constitute a *habitus*. Between the formal subjectivity of souls and the substantial materiality of organisms there is an intermediate plane which is occupied by the body as a bundle of affects and capacities and which is the origin of perspectives (1998:478).

It is this kind of body where different perspectives emerge but can also be apprehended (1998:479-480). Shamans are people who are able to ‘put on’ other entities’ bodies-as-clothing, and adopt their perspectives; something which suggests that, ultimately, bodies are not mere ‘envelopes’, but constitutive of what one, through the body, perceives. This is why efficacy is inscribed into the skin or masks:

To put on mask-clothing is not so much to conceal a human essence beneath an animal appearance, but rather to activate the powers of a different body. The animal clothes that shamans use to travel the cosmos are not fantasies but instruments: they are akin to diving equipment, or space suits, and not to carnival masks. The intention when donning a wet suit is to be able to function like a fish, to breathe underwater, not to conceal oneself under a strange covering [...] the interest lies more in what these clothes do rather than what they hide (1998:482).

From (Amerindian) ‘perspectivism’ to (Afro-Cuban) ‘divination’ (via Inner Asia)

Most ethnographic accounts, apart from those of Viveiros de Castro, which deal with perspectivism derive from the indigenous peoples of Central and South America and especially the Amazon (see Århem 1993, 1996; Course 2007, 2009, 2010; Fausto 2007; Gow 2001; Lima 1999; Sulkin 2005; Vilaça 2000, 2002, 2003, 2005). Despite their ethnographic particularities, again, most of these accounts are interested in revealing the perspectival variation among different kinds of ‘persons’; what is broadly defined as ‘humans’ and ‘nonhumans’.

Perspectivism, apart from an ‘ethnographic fact’, is also a theoretical, and even ethical, stance. As I said before, going against ‘reductionism’ and ‘constructivism’, which are led to matters of ‘representation’ (for interesting discussions, see Latour 2010; Pickering 2000; Strathern 1990, 1999; Wagner 1978, 1986), perspectivism can be seen as a (more) critical *decision*—hence its ethical dimension—to take seriously the intentionality, subjectivity and personhood (see Mauss 1996) of ‘nonhumans’ or, in other words, their ‘ontological’ constitution, rather than their symbolic features, metaphorical meaning, or (anti-)social function.

This ‘theoretical’ stance bares its ‘loop’ implications to and is congruent with perspectivism’s ‘ethnographic’ dimensions. Description is not only confined to ‘nonhumans’ as ways or tools—‘epistemology’ in Viveiros de Castro’s terms—of reflecting or constructing human relations, social structures or even dealing with human needs and anxieties, but heavily gravitates towards *what*—‘ontology’ in Viveiros de Castro’s terms—they are; in other words, indigenous definitions of them. This creates a relatively new and not so much cultivated field of ethnographic description of the instances wherein humans perceive nonhumans and vice versa, especially in their perspectival exchanges: ‘[P]erspectivism may have a deep connection with exchange—not only how it may be a type of exchange, but how any exchange is by definition an exchange of perspectives’ (Viveiros de Castro 2004a:473).

This, I believe, points to the strong affinities between Amerindian perspectivism and Afro-Cuban divination. In both, an ‘exchange of perspectives’ is vital and their driving force; its *mana*, so to speak. To extract perspectivism from its Amerindian context is not a straightforward thing to do, and it is here that the tight bond between its ‘theoretical’ and ‘ethnographic’ dimensions is mostly exemplified. Nevertheless, by trying to do so, we might gain a broader perspective of its fruitful merits for anthropology. Another important element of perspectivism, where its theory and ethnography appear to converge, is how the personhood of nonhumans is understood. Rather than adopting a ‘relativistic’ stance, which would probably argue that because nonhumans are ascribed agency and intentionality they are thus given a voice, a perspective, perspectivism inverts such a claim by arguing that it is the perspective that creates the person, be that human or nonhuman: ‘*the point of view creates the subject*’ (Viveiros de Castro 1998:476).

In the Afro-Cuban cosmos, as we have seen, other-than-human entities are subjects because they have perspectives which are instantiated either as affects through the body and its senses (*muertos*) or as myths through consecrated objects (*orichas*). One of the main obstacles that perspectivism poses in the effort to export it out of the dense Amazonian ‘forest of mirrors’ (Viveiros de Castro 2004b), seems to be the strong correlation of nonhumans with animals, forcing the Amazonianists to engage on a more theoretical level with the debate on ‘culture and nature’ and stand

critically towards ‘our Western naturalist cosmologies’, to echo Descola (1996:88). To repeat in a succinct fashion some of perspectivism’s Amerindian characteristics, the potential capacity to have a point of view is attributed to a condition common to all species of humanity (‘culture’), while the content of the point of view, what is seen and perceived, varies because they occupy different bodies (‘nature’). Hence, the conclusion that perspectivism poses, namely, that there is one culture and many natures, against ‘our’ one nature, many cultures: ‘If [...] the common condition of humans and animals is humanity not animality, this is because ‘humanity’ is the name for the general form taken by the Subject’ (Viveiros de Castro 1998:477).

Even if perspectivism is taken as a phenomenon that relates humans with nonhumans other than animals, such as spirits of the dead and deities (see Viveiros de Castro 1992:58-91, 215-251; 1998:482-483), nonhumans-as-animals seem to encompass the latter and thus define them. Here we are faced with small-scale socialities very much predicated on hunting, occasional warfare, potential affinity and potential enmity and constituted on an interchangeable and dialectical ‘game’ of predator and prey.²⁴ As Viveiros de Castro puts it:

The fundamental distinction between the living and the dead is made by the body and precisely not by the spirit; death is a bodily catastrophe which prevails as differentiator over the common ‘animation’ of the living and the dead [...] [B]eing definitely separated from their bodies, the dead are not human. As spirits defined by their disjunction from a human body, the dead are logically attracted to the bodies of animals; this is why to die is to transform into an animal [references omitted], as it is to transform into other figures of bodily alterity, such as affines and enemies. In this manner, if animism affirms a subjective and social continuity between humans and animals, its somatic complement, perspectivism, establishes an objective discontinuity, equally social, between live humans and dead humans (1998:482-483).

Animals, and nature in general, have more tangible ‘bodies’ than, say, the dead or deities, and it seems that many Amerindians concentrate their perspectival efforts on the former, or in terms of the former when confronted with the latter. But, what about those contexts where this is not the case, and deities and the dead enter the ‘perspectivist game’ and occupy its focal position? In order to proceed, I propose that it is essential not to stick to all the premises of perspectivism as this has been developed by the ‘Americanists’. That ‘the point of view creates the subject’ may not reveal a common condition of humanity but stress the proposition that intentionality

²⁴ See, for example, Århem 1993:11-12; Lima 1999; Sulkin 2005:5, 18-20; Vilça 2005:450-452; Viveiros de Castro 1998:471; outside the Amerindian context, see Willerslev 2007.

(subjectivity, agency, intelligence, for example) and the ability to have a perspective is not necessarily distinctive of humans.

Yet, and this is what I believe applies for perspectivism in general, the body, not only in its variations, such as human and animal, but also in its various degrees of absences—as is with *muertos* and *orichas*, and as is stated in the beginning of the previous quotation by Viveiros de Castro—plays a central role. Following from the previous chapter, and after taking a small detour through Inner Asia, where perspectivism has been recently sought to be exported, I shall try to throw more light onto the Afro-Cuban ethnography and argue that other-than-human perspectives in Cuba are perceived and, thus defined, in relation to human bodies and perspectives as they variably lack a human body. Briefly put, *muertos* are ex-human bodies and *orichas* are non-bodies, thus being able to occupy and encompass a variety of other ‘bodies’. For the former, the effect is to adopt ‘immanent’ perspectives, while for the latter more ‘transcendental’ ones. In this peculiar context, affects and objects are and have perspectives and are thus subjects; and because the entities that mobilize and direct them do so in relation to human *camino*s and perspectives and bodies, Afro-Cuban divination and its cosmos do indeed show a great potential affinity with perspectivism.

In order to strengthen the link between (Amerindian) perspectivism and (Afro-Cuban) divination, I will take a small deviation which, nonetheless, throws light on both the particularity of Amerindian perspectivism and its potential theoretical reach. I will make use of a collective effort to take Viveiros de Castro’s perspectivism and explore the possibility of its analytical value in an ethnographic region as broad as Inner Asia (see Pedersen, Empson and Humphrey 2007; see also Pedersen 2001; Swancutt 2007; Willerslev 2007). I will pay particular attention to Holbraad and Willerslev’s contribution (2007), which, I believe, offers insightful conclusions. Inner Asian perspectivism, according to these authors, is a meaningful category exactly because it both resembles and contrasts with the Amerindian one. Let us follow their line of argument.

In the very beginning of their paper the authors present us with an important feature of perspectivism: following DaCol, also a contributor to the same volume, they ask: ‘What can a body do? In perspectivism, this is always *the* question’

(Holbraad and Willerslev 2007:329). Indeed, as we saw previously, differences in perspectives for the Amerindians are located in the differences among bodies (as ‘bundles of affects’). Shortly after such a minimal definition of perspectivism, Holbraad and Willerslev suggest a stark contrast between Amerindian and Inner Asian Perspectivism, one that makes us ‘stretch’ (2007:330) our understanding of it. The latter deals more with ‘transcendent’ perspectives, while the former with ‘immanent’ ones. Each one is further homologized or alternatively associated with a set of other terms: Inner Asian, ‘transcendental’ perspectivism is also ‘vertical’, ‘asymmetrical’, ‘hierarchical’ and even ‘syntagmatic’, while Amerindian, ‘immanentist’ perspectivism is ‘horizontal’, ‘symmetrical’, ‘egalitarian’ and even ‘paradigmatic’. What all this might mean is exactly what the authors set out to explain in the rest of the paper.

Amerindian perspectivism is ‘immanentist’ because each kind of being has inherently the capacity to become any other. This means that the faculty of having a point of view is potentially transferred as the faculty to adopt any other kind of point of view, provided there is a temporary bodily transformation. The shaman, from seeing blood—the human point of view—transforms into a being (a jaguar, for example) and, thus, sees it as manioc beer:

Each being has the potential to transform into every other because all beings (or at least all the cosmologically significant species that enter into this perspectivist game) containing each other’s perspectives immanently (Holbraad and Willerslev 2007:330).

However, perspectival exchanges in Inner Asia are ‘vertical’ and this implies perspectives which are, paradoxical as it may initially sound, ‘transcendent’ to each other:

[C]hanges of perspective cannot only be a matter of actualising a potential that already exists immanently within all beings, since beings are asymmetrically circumscribed in terms of their relative *lack* of precisely such a potential. Rather, beings’ perspectivist transformations must also involve the capacity to occupy perspectives that are transcendent to them (2007:331).

While the Amerindians’ adoption of other perspectives is absolute, they fully see exactly what the other sees (blood becomes beer), the Inner Asians adopt them by proxy, as it were, and, thus, ‘in a crucial sense remain *other to them*’ (2007:331). How can perspectives be able to be exchanged if they are transcendent to each other, the authors ask. Given that we *are* dealing with perspectivism, namely, that each

perspective is 'constituted by its relations to all other perspectives' (2007:333), what should be explored is in what way transcendence and perspectivism might be related. This requires a notion of transcendence that although it is defined, negatively, as an 'impossibility', at the same time, can also be defined, positively, not in terms of 'lack' or 'absence', but in terms of an 'excessive presence', as the totality of perspectives:

What makes perspectives transcendent is that they contain within themselves too many, rather than too few, viewpoints – the 'view from everywhere' rather than the perhaps more familiar 'view from nowhere' (2007:333).

It is this transcendental 'view from everywhere' that is attained in Inner Asian perspectivism. Nevertheless, this does not occur in absolute terms. Starting from Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception, Holbraad and Willerslev argue that to perceive an object always involves doing so from a certain point of view. This means that from the point of view of a particular perspective, there will always be other sides of the object that are not attained, they remain hidden, but one can presume or imagine them. It is this sense of other unseen yet envisaged sides that suggest, theoretically at least, the possibility of the 'view from everywhere', which in Merleau-Ponty's terms, is a 'normative ideal' (2007:334); an ideal which because perspectives are body-specific, can never be fully realised but only perceived in various degrees of relative absence (see 2007:334). It is this 'normative ideal' that Viveiros de Castro describes as existing in the mythical past of the Amerindians, where differences in perspectives did not exist and bodies were mixed with each other. What prevailed then was an in-distinction of perspectives, a 'perfect transparency', a 'chaosmos' (2007:335; see also Viveiros de Castro 2004b).

Inner Asian cosmologies do not conceive such a pre-perspectival mythological past and world. Similarly, their shamans, when they come into contact with the spirit-world, do not perceive it as transparently as their Amerindian counterparts do. Spirits are perceived in a distorted, 'non-realist and sometimes monstrous fashion' (2007:336):

[I]f the 'invisible' world of spirits is defined as the 'view from everywhere', then it follows that such a viewpoint cannot be embodied in any conventional realist form [...] the shaman does not fully occupy the 'view from everywhere', since no embodied subject can fully occupy this view [...] Perhaps this is the reason why not even shamans are clear about what spirits actually see (2007:336-337).

Inner Asians, thus, can only get glimpses of this ‘view from everywhere’ and be limited in their effort to approach but never fully reach it. Their world is one of asymmetrical and hierarchical orders (of things and spirits) and, accordingly, perspectival transformations occur in a vertical axis in relation to the ideal ‘view from everywhere’.

Because such an ideal is ultimately unattainable, each perspective is at a particular and variable distance from it. Not all perspectives are equidistant from it; this is why there is verticality. The closer to it the more they are valued; this is why there is hierarchy: ‘Inner Asian perspectivism then forces us to deal with *degrees* of perceptive power’ (2007:341). The closer to the ideal the more perceptive one is or becomes. The more distant—embodied—the more limited to a view from somewhere. Horizontal, immanentist perspectives can equally substitute one another like paradigms. Vertical, transcendental ones ordinally distribute themselves as distances from the ‘view from everywhere’ like syntagms:

So if the semiotic metaphor for the perspectives that beings can occupy in the Amerindian case is something like the letters of the alphabet, in the Inner Asian case it would be the words that letters can make up or, by extension, the sentences and narratives that words themselves can build in syntax. The Inner Asian shaman, for example, becomes a spirit less like an ‘x’ could become a ‘y’ or ‘z’, and more like Cinderella could become a princess (2007:342).

This hierarchical transcendalist perception of perspectives also has a temporal dimension. Their distribution is temporal—as ‘asymmetrical relations of ‘before’ and ‘after’ (2007:343)—and thus their deviation is not only measured from the ideal ‘view from everywhere’ but also from the equally ideal ‘view from everywhen’ (2007:344).

Having taken this small detour, from Cuba to the Amazon and then to Inner Asia, we return full circle back to Cuba. What does all this have to do with Afro-Cuban divination, one could ask. Are divination and perspectivism interchangeable terms? And if they are, what is it in Cuba, ‘vertical’ or ‘horizontal’, Inner Asian or Amerindian-like? Well, maybe it is both; and more! It would be, though, too forced or a contradiction in terms to make an argument that in Cuba there are different kinds of perspectivism (a multi-perspectivist cosmos?). I wish rather to propose that what Holbraad and Willerslev identify as (Amerindian) ‘horizontal’ and ‘immanentist’ and what as (Inner Asian) ‘vertical’ and ‘transcendentalist’ perspectivism, may bare

striking resemblances to the ‘immanent’ perspectives of *muertos* and the ‘transcendental’ ones of *orichas*. In this case, and as I hinted in the previous chapter, because the various motions that divination directs are harnessed through the ‘space’ in-between immanence and transcendence, and not as referential points in isolation, Afro-Cuban perspectivism is instantiated in and premised on this intermediary and ‘motile’, *sensu* Holbraad, ‘space’.

The point of departure and initial reference is, once more, Holbraad and his view on *Ocha/Ifá* divination. In the last part of his contribution to *Thinking Through Things* (2007b; especially pp. 207-217), Holbraad, as we have already seen, refers to the ‘problem of transcendence’ (2007b:207), both as an ethnographic and a theoretical one. The *orichas*, albeit being transcendent and mythological entities, can and do relate to humans by becoming immanent through the powerful powder of divination. This movement from transcendence to immanence is best thought as one from distance to proximity. This is exactly the point where Holbraad brings Viveiros de Castro into the discussion (2007b:209-217).

Briefly, he argues that both the *orichas* and the Amerindian spirits are characterised by a ‘potentiality’ (‘virtuality’ in Viveiros de Castro’s terms and ‘motility’ in his) to relate by becoming other (2007b:210). Nevertheless, there is a contrast between the two: Amerindian spirits ‘exist’ and ‘become’ immanently; whereas the *orichas*’ potentiality and ‘intrinsic capacity’ is to move from transcendence to immanence. It is here that Holbraad, following Stephen Hugh-Jones, distinguishes between ‘horizontal’ and ‘vertical’ types of shamanism and, by extension, divination (2007b:214-215). We have already seen what these two types are and how they can be compared through the ethnographic lenses of Amerindian and Inner Asian perspectivism. Exactly the same strategy is followed in order to compare the anarchic horizontality of Amerindian spirits and the hierarchical verticality of the *orichas*. Similarly to Inner Asian spirits, which are conceived in terms of distance and degrees from the ‘view from everywhere’, ‘what makes Ifá ‘vertical’ is the cosmological premise upon which such rankings are conceived, namely the idea that deities can be characterised by their degree of ‘distance’ from the human world’ (2007b:215).

If such is the close affinity of the *orichas* to Inner Asian spirits, one could not be accused of thinking that what Holbraad has in mind for *Ocha/Ifá* divination is that it is indeed a kind of perspectivism:

They [the *orichas*] differ from the Amazonian paradigm in that their ontic transformations also imply shifts in what one might call *ontological status*, since their multiple becoming is inflected hierarchically as a ‘continuum’ of relatively proximate and relatively distant ‘manifestations’ [...] The shamanic ability to ‘call spirits’, explains Viveiros de Castro, is a matter of ‘vision’: where non-shamans just see animals in the forest, for example, shamans see spirits [...] The problem with the *orishas*, on the other hand, is not so much that they are invisible but rather that they are not fully ‘here’ in the first place. After all, insofar as the *orishas* are visible at all, it takes no special powers to see them [...] The problem is how to elicit the deities’ presence in these concrete forms [such as the consecrated objects] – how to elicit immanence, having posited transcendence. One might say that if the shaman’s task is to see what is present, the diviner’s is to render present what is already seen (2007b:216).

Holbraad goes as far as to repeat the semiotic metaphor of ‘syntagmatic’ and ‘paradigmatic’ relations, the former providing relational shifts of ‘before’ and ‘after’. He concludes:

[D]eity-human relations [in *Ifá*] are not given as cosmological *fait accompli* (as virtual relations that are there for those who can see them, as in horizontal shamanism), but rather have to be *accomplished* by eliciting the deities from the relative ontological distance of transcendence to the relative proximity of immanence (2007b:217).

Striking as these resemblances between Inner Asian perspectivism and *Ocha/Ifá* divination may seem, there is an important difference which, I suspect, prevents Holbraad from openly and unproblematically advocating the latter’s potential conflation with perspectivism. This could be argued to be the fact that Inner Asian shamans seem to ‘function’ as receivers and transmitters of the spirits’ perspectives mainly through the body and its perceptive powers rather than what in *Ocha/Ifá* divination seems to play such an important role, namely, oracles crucially involving, first, objects and, second, mythological ‘signs’. If in perspectivism, what a body can do is always *the* question, then what of the latter, where bodies are somewhat secondary in the perceptive ability to adopt the deities’ perspectives. An immediate and facile way to get round this apparent incompatibility is by trying to answer the question in initially negative terms. What can a body *not* do, could also be part of *the* question perspectivism forces us to always ask (or at least a particular kind of perspectivism).

However, I would like to suggest that the ‘non-bodily-ness’ of the *orichas* permits them to occupy and move through a multiplicity of ‘bodies’, not only human

but nonhuman as well, such as ‘objects’ like their oracles. Before dealing with the perspectives of the *orichas*, I will first engage with those of *muertos* as I have classified them into ‘alien’, *nfumbi* and ‘affines’. Their perspectives heavily rely on two different but simultaneous conditions: *muertos* in general, being ex-humans, used to have a body with a specific biography but, at the same time, they do not fully have it in their present state. As their past condition—embodied biography—persists through affective memories, their present condition—disembodied necrography—is defined by the former as a movement (or not, in the case of ‘alien’ *muertos*) away from it.

The perspectives of *muertos*

(a) ‘Alien’ muertos

A very broad distinction among deities and *muertos* is the ‘form’ in which each category comes to instantiate itself as a subject with a point of view; a perspective. The *orichas* ‘speak’ through objects since their consecration confers them the ability to ‘come down’ at the invocative will of the humans and render the perspectives of the former relevant to the lives of the latter. Thus, the objects manipulated as the *orichas*’ oracles could be seen as the adequate and necessary ‘things’ with which they ‘speak’, namely, as their communicative organs. When an adept or client of the *Ocha/Ifá* oracles exclaims: ‘such-and-such oricha told me so-and-so’, he or she suggests the above. Furthermore, the very oracles of *Ocha* and *Ifá* when cast on the divining mat, they may fall ‘mouth-up’ (*boca-arriba*) or ‘mouth-down’ (*boca-abajo*). It is often said by diviners that it is the first which signifies the ‘conversing position’ (*posición conversatoria*) of the oracle.

On the other hand, the *muertos* ‘speak’ through a much more visceral and affective fashion, leaving aside objects, and placing them in a secondary although often complementary position. When people recount what *muertos* tell them, this involves an experience whereby what is said is conveyed through the senses and the body of the mediums. *Muertos* do not have a body as such—this is what crucially makes them *muertos* after all—but they get attached to a body and communicate through it. Following from this broad distinction between deities-as-objects and *muertos*-as-affects, I shall try to clarify in what way we can compare the kinds of

perspectives each articulate and what humans perceive by adopting them in divination.

Within the category of *muertos*, as I have already described, we can trace another broad distinction, that between ‘alien’ and ‘affines’. A very common approach towards *muertos* is initiated by fathoming out whether a particular *muerto* that makes its presence felt, is ‘attached’ to the individual in a more or less permanent way. In the case that a *muerto*’s presence is sensed as accidental or incidental this consequently indicates that the *muerto* does not ‘belong’ to the individual and therefore the two must be distanced and kept apart. Importantly, this sensing of not belonging and incidental attachment is confluent with a sense of an absence. Nevertheless, the absence I am referring to is not to be understood in terms of existence or as the opposite of presence—this would contradict the very point that there *are* ‘alien’ *muertos* and they *can* be felt—but, rather, in terms of a potentiality to initiate and cultivate a relation, what, in other words, is positively postulated for *muertos* who *do* have an ‘affinity’ with the person—the ‘affines’. The absence of any relational potentiality of ‘alien’ *muertos* is sensed in various ways. The words mediums often use to describe the experience of them indicate a sense of ‘chilliness’ (*frialdad*) and ‘darkness’ (*oscuridad*), for example. More often, they indicate a lack of knowledge both about the *muerto* itself and from it about the person who it has incidentally got attached to. A much more complex phenomenon is that ‘alien’ *muertos* do offer knowledge and information, but this is ultimately confusing and confused. Indeed, as these *muertos* are depicted as aimlessly wandering spirits in a state of confusion, they are very likely to transfer their confusion to the person they temporarily get attached to. Ultimately, ‘alien’ *muertos* are thought and perceived as entities which cause misdirection insofar as they are misdirected themselves. Here is an aspect that the living and the dead share to a bigger degree than deities, and which does not create a rigid distinction between life and death. Both are perceived as having a course or a ‘path’.

Humans, while in life, have a *camino* which, through the Afro-Cuban cosmos, is constituted by their relations to other-than-human entities. Death brings a destruction of the body, but not a complete annihilation of the person (see Bloch and Parry 1996; Course 2007; Hertz 1960; Tsintjilonis 2004a, 2004b, 2007). The

decomposition of the body is part of its transition to the world of the dead, which in its turn is also transitory. An important feature of this chain of transitions, from life to death, to the various phases of death itself, is considered to be a realization of such a qualitatively distinct ontological leap, from embodied life to a disembodied one. It is vital that this be achieved in the early stages of death, because, otherwise, the disembodied person will still act as and think as if it is alive.

For instance, my friend Yodania, when she moved to her new flat, would experience a series of minor mischiefs. She often heard strange sounds coming from rooms other than the one she happened to be in, she would occasionally find that her furniture had moved position, belongings went missing and only to then reappear where they used to be, and power cuts when this did not occur in the rest of the neighbourhood. An *espiritista* friend of hers once visited Yodania and, to the latter's surprise, she immediately told her that she could sense the spirit of an old lady in the house. The old lady, according to Yodania's friend, used to live in the house and had died alone from a stroke. Her spirit was in a state of confusion and insisted on inhabiting what it perceived to still be her house. After that, they conducted a 'cleansing' (*limpieza*) of the house and 'gave acknowledgment' (*dar conocimiento*) to the spirit, making it aware that it was no longer alive and the owner of the house. Here is an example of a *muerto* that does not belong to the person by way of 'affinity', but its presence indicates the absence of a relation to a living human being that would 'acknowledge' in full its new condition as *muerto* and develop an intimate relation with it. From Yodania's point of view, the *muerto* was 'alien' and remained as such by an initial acknowledgment but also a consequent expiation; the *muerto* was sent off and literally evicted. I do not possess substantial ethnographic evidence that 'alien' *muertos* are solely perceived as those who do not know that they are dead, and I suspect that, although a recurrent theme, this may not be the only definition of them. It is here that I suggest 'perspectivism' can provide us with a more adequate understanding.

Much of what a *muerto* is required to do is to start getting used to its new condition, one that is characterized by the loss of its body; but this is not an abrupt loss where automatically its memories and affects dissolve into nothingness. There is a transitional phase wherein its individuality and memory as an ex-living human

being start fading. Its biography—*camino* in life—begins a slow process of transformation into a necrography—*camino* in death. ‘Alien’ *muertos* have been formally and physically detached from their body; that is what makes them *muertos*. Nevertheless, from an affective point of view, they keep on remembering it and this makes them attached to it; affectively as memories, physically in its remains. Thus, affects, memories, habits, experiences and, in general, biographical residues survive the demise of the body. In the case of ‘alien’ *muertos*, though, these biographical residues are too intense and haunt the *muerto* without letting it transcend its human and individual past and ‘evolve’, in spiritist terms. Intense as these memories may be, they are not communicated in their detail to the living but in their pure and indistinct intensity. In fact, between the latter and ‘alien’ *muertos* there seems to be a profound void of communication and relation; at least in the positive terms that ‘affinity’ denotes. ‘Alien’ *muertos* are the ones who cannot adopt perspectives as *muertos*. In general, other-than-human entities are praised for having perspectives humans, under normal, non-oracular conditions, cannot attain. The excessive attachment to matter of ‘alien’ *muertos* makes them sense and perceive the world as if they were alive and, even more so, to sense it through the body and its biographical residues of the living individual they used to be, even in the physical absence of it.

‘Alien’ *muertos* can thus be broadly defined as those who are alien to the fact that they are *muertos*. Their perspectives are too immanent to the world of their ‘things’ and the living and, for that, they cannot ‘other’ themselves from the past—their biography—and identify with their new condition—their necrography. This lack of potential to transcend does not signify a kind of transcendence as the hallmark of non-relation, but quite the opposite. Not being able to move from immanence to transcendence is what constitutes their inability to relate. In relation to perspectivism, the perspectives of them just remain ‘human’ perspectives and, thus, do not ‘alter’ themselves qualitatively so as to become radically different perspectives that would grant them the possibility to enter the ‘perspectivist game’ and start ‘seeing’ themselves as spirits.

(b) Nfumbi

The *nfumbi* are *muertos* drawn from the reservoir of ‘alien’ *muertos*. Previously unrelated, they undergo a kind of transformation which simultaneously alters their

condition as ‘alien’ and, in another sense, preserves if not accentuates it. The excessive attachment—immanence—of ‘alien’ *muertos* to ‘matter’ is revealed by the way an *nfumbi* is constituted. The *palero* unearths its human remains and places them into the *nganga*, a ritually ‘prepared’ receptacle in which the *nfumbi* will come to reside and ‘work’ with the *palero*. Whatever else ‘material attachment’ means, in the case of ‘alien’ *muertos*, it importantly involves an attachment to their biographical residues I previously mentioned. These ‘reside’ or are attached to what physically remains from the body, the bones and the skull. By unearthing them, an apparently contradictory event occurs, which seems to be constitutive of what *nfumbi* are. On the one hand, the *muerto* having been unconsciously drawn from its remains, realizes ‘in shock’ (see below) that it is a spirit of someone who has died. Augusto an old *palero* remembers:

When I went to the cemetery, almost 25 years ago, to find my *muerto*, I remember the state of shock the *nfumbi* was in at the beginning. I chanted for a long time over its remains in its tomb, so as to bring it near them [the remains]. When I sensed its presence, I started explaining to it that it was dead and with nobody to take care of it. It reacted violently and even tried to possess me, but I resisted. It was only after it realized its condition [as dead and alone] that it agreed to become my *nfumbi* and gave me permission to bring its bones back at home and put them in the *nganga*. It knew that if it didn’t [give permission] it would remain permanently wandering alone and confused in this world.

It is as if the *nfumbi* is drawn by its remains but without realizing that they are remains of its dead body. In a sense, it is drawn to them but cannot perceive them as such—as remains—but as what they previously were. The *muerto* does not see remains from without; it senses them from within as if they still functioned as the internal structure of a living body, surrounded by organs, flesh and skin. Thus, the manipulation of the bones and skull by the *palero* ‘violently’ transform an interior organ to an exterior one and, in this sense, the *muerto*, equally violently and abruptly, realizes for the first time its condition as dead. Nevertheless, this does not lead to a more ‘peaceful’ transcending to the world of the dead, as the unearthing and manipulation of its remains keep on reminding the *muerto* of its individuality and human past. The most significant transformation is that from an ‘alien’, unrelated and aimlessly wandering spirit, it becomes related to somebody—the *palero*—and acquires a sort of direction or *camino*, channelled into the *nganga* and the ‘works’ of its owner.

Ngangas, before receiving an *nfumbi*, are said to be animated and function as a sort of ‘protection’ (*protección*) to a relatively smaller degree when compared to when they do acquire the *nfumbi*. When the *nfumbi* is inserted into them, it is said that *ngangas* acquire their full potential of strength and efficacy, followed by a second ‘initiation’ (*rayamiento*), linking and conferring the ‘powers’ (*poderes*) of the *nganga* to the initiate. Among others, these include: the right to initiate others in *Palo*; the increase of efficacy of his spells, as now he ‘works’ with his *nfumbi*, and an increase in the ‘vision’ (*vista*) of the *palero*, as now he can communicate with the *nfumbi* and acquire, through it, valuable information; that is, the full accomplishment of the *nganga* as an oracular centre. Augusto comments on this point:

When the *nfumbi* came into the *nganga* it [the *nganga*] acquired a life of its own. Before it served as a small protection, but now it became a whole entity [*una entidad completa*], with which I could communicate in full and conduct strong works [*hacer trabajos fuertes*].

Could it not be suggested, then, that the *nganga* becomes the new body of the *nfumbi* which, although it is formed by totally new ‘ingredients’ (the receptacle and the rest of the things placed in it), in it exists something of its old human body, its bones and skull? I do not have enough information to firmly claim the above hypothesis, yet it seems definitive that the *nfumbi* adds to and augments the *vista* of the *palero*. Therefore, *nfumbi* have perspectives and *paleros* are the individuals who can adopt them.

This is exemplified in instances of ‘witchcraft’ (*brujería*), where the *nfumbi* prove to be the entities *par excellence*, first, to ‘send’ it and, second, to detect it, that is, to perceive other *nfumbi* and the *brujería* they ‘send’. Because the *nfumbi* are *muertos* with an obstructed *camino*—and because their materialization in the *nganga* obfuscates this obstruction as it embodies them in a too ‘human’ way through their remains—they are able to be engaged with the everyday and very personal desires and fears of humans. In other words, their efficacy is traced as having an extremely immanent perspective very akin to humans, although with their own ‘supernatural’ powers, they are able to perceive details of human *caminos* which other, more disembodied entities, in their transcendental perspective, fail to detect. Additionally, these very context specific perspectives are able to influence, obstruct or re-align human *caminos* in their particularities, but not so much in the more general flow of

them. In this sense, human perspectives and *nfumbi* perspectives are always in tension, of the one merging into the other, as their ontological affinity is indeed in very close and immanent contact.

(c) '*Affine*' *muertos*

To some important extent, '*affine*' *muertos* can be said to be those who, unlike the '*alien*' ones, are in a positive process of acquiring a perspectival ability that is '*true*' to their new condition as disembodied entities, which nevertheless, used to be human and embodied. The large qualitative difference between '*alien*' *muertos* and '*affines*' was indicated to me by the fact that the latter, in their tendency to get attached to and follow a particular living human being, had a wealth of relevant things to say and perspectives to transmit. As there is a multiplicity of '*affine*' *muertos* who get attached to an individual, each one slowly builds its identity by spelling out information about aspects of its biographical past, its wishes of the present and valuable knowledge about its living '*affine*'.

Muertos do not get attached to a person's body in order to gain a perspectival capacity; they do so in order to communicate it. In the success of this their perspective changes; it starts transcending. Their perspective starts evolving into a more transcendental one. Their initial anonymity involves an inert and immanent state where they are attached too much to their biography, impeding them to have a '*proper*' necrography; one that could make them able to transform. To do so, a *muerto* needs to get attached to *some*-body and initiate a relation with it; start an exchange of perspectives. As an '*affine*', the *muerto* is now able to channel its desires but, along with this, it also gets intimate with the desires of the person. Thus, may not this be a process of realization and actualization in the sense that what previously seemed to be a monologue is actually a dialogue? A body is inhabited by more than one voice which must be discerned so that they can converse with each other. An affect, such as a headache, is not exactly one's own but the effort of another's perspective to be given voice, to pass on a message. Affects, in this case, are perspectives and vice versa.

Trying to come to terms with what people might mean by '*affinity*' when they describe their relation to '*their muertos*', we could view it as one in which a person becomes intimate with the '*alter*' and not the self, '*an intimacy which gives*

rise to familiarity rather than the other way round' (Tsintjilonis 2004b: 383). A body, in this way, becomes a shared 'material' and because of this, perspectives must be exchanged in order to be voiced. This is multiplied by the fact that one does not only discern between his or her self and a *muerto*, but also between one and another *muerto*; a body is followed by a multiplicity of *muertos* and if a headache is due to one, a certain affinity to music, for instance, might be perceived as stemming from another *muerto*. It is also worth noting that this kind of 'affinity' is not static. The headache might come less often or become less intense, or even disappear, as soon and as long as the person acknowledges the *muerto*'s presence and starts fulfilling its desires. On the other hand, cultivating one's musical inclinations is perceived as a parallel cultivation of their relation with the other *muerto*. Equally, the *muertos*' very presence is not static either. A *muerto* might become more evident and vociferous at a certain period in one's life and diminish or even disappear at another. In pure spiritist terms, this kind of waning of a *muerto* and its affects signifies that it has reached a quite high level of spiritual evolution and material detachment. The *muerto* becomes once again more anonymous, more disembodied and detached from its particular biography. At the same time, its perspective also becomes less specific and less concerned with the particularities of the everyday issues of the person to whom it was attached. Transcending embodiment, a very 'spiritual' *muerto*'s perspective also becomes more transcendental. Although still emanating from a particular body, it tends to be less intense applying 'universal' messages to 'humanity' in general, giving value to charity and good deeds for example (and, thus, adopting a moral character very familiar to a Christian ethos).

In general, *muertos* transcending their memories of their past individuality and embodiment, start dissolving into a more anonymous agglomeration of *muertos* that is characterized by more typical features. The spirit of a doctor, for instance, that even as a spirit helped people heal, transcends into a group of spirits that heal, the 'medical commission' (*comisión medica*; see chapter 3) and, at the same time, starts loosing its biographical residues that kept on resurfacing even after physical death. A complete elimination of these individual memories from the part of the spirit signifies very often a gradual 'softening' of the visceral experiences of it, they

become more subtle and, sometimes, even disappear and get totally detached from the living body of their ‘affine’.

The ontological transformation of *muertos* through their ‘affinal’ and perspectival mobilization involves a process of disembodiment premised on their past partially persisting into their present bodily-ness. In order to transcend, *muertos* must be assisted into remembrance. It is only as soon as the *muerto*, importantly through the living, perceives its biography as a memory and not as still unfolding, as if it were alive, that it starts to forget and thus transcend. To borrow from Willerslev (2007), and his interesting juxtaposition of mimesis (Taussig 1993), ‘partial’ or ‘analogous identifications’ (Pedersen 2001) and notion of ‘not me, *not* not-me’ (Schechner 1985), *muertos*, through their ‘affinization’ with the living, acquire a perspective within life and apart from it, ‘betwixt and between’ it (Willerslev 2007:25). The *muerto* acquires a perspective of its biography as an ‘imperfect copy’ (2007:95), thus realizing its new condition (as *muerto*); and this is achieved through and with the help of its living ‘affine’:

[I]t takes *two* to make *one*: the subject recognizes itself as such only at the moment it “loses” itself in/as another [...] There is a paradox here in that the subject must experience self-objectification or self-alienation in order to gain a sense of itself as self (2007:67).

The perspectives of the deities

Deities like the *orichas* are entities that exhibit a much larger degree of alterity when it comes to what they are and what kind of ‘body’ they have. This is exemplified by the instances in which they appear and communicate with humans. Their alterity is suggested in the form of them ‘coming down’ and ‘speaking’. Being considered as more distant, their presence must be achieved by being ‘brought down’. Objects acquire a much more crucial role in this effort and bodies, being too human, are somewhat secondary. This is why divination involves consecrated objects which serve as the deities’ oracles and through them they ‘speak’. The *orichas*’ perspectives are deemed as, firstly, more encompassing, referring to the broader *camino* of the person, and, secondly and because of the former, as more general, where details are not at hand from the point of view of the deities. Their oracles are the means with which humans obtain a ‘visual’ presentation of a condensed mythological collection of events which are meant to correspond to the specific object of divination. The

orichas are seen to actively intervene in two main instances of divination. Firstly, they are the ones who, during the casting of the oracle, interfere and ‘give out’ the oracular configuration. Secondly, this configuration ‘says’, by way of correspondence, something about the client. Each ‘throw’ (*tirada*) of the oracle, while from the human point of view, is a throw left to chance, exactly because it occurs in a divinatory environment (where the *orichas* have been invoked and ‘brought down’), from the deities’ point of view, the humans’ voluntary resignation of their agency transforms (as the oracle is falling on the divining mat) into what the *orichas* decide the oracular outcome to be. So, what seems to be apparently and initially left to chance is actually something left to the *orichas*.

The outcome is a ‘sign’ (*signo* or *oddu*) which ‘stands for’ the specific mythological context that corresponds to the particular client and divination. Yet, each *signo* is more than a symbolic visualization of its contents, as it is treated as the very essence of what is said by the deities and, by extension, what corresponds to the client. This is probably why *signos* have an efficacy of their own—sacrifices are made to them directly—to the extent that, in certain contexts, they are deemed as entities in themselves or *caminos* of the deities invoked. What I wish to emphasize here is the intimate link between *signos* and the deities’ perspectival instantiation. Through the *signos* their perspectives are mobilized through divination and enter the ‘perspectivist game’. Before the oracular revelation of one’s corresponding *signos*, they—the *signos*—exist as a totality of events that happened in a mythological time and space and which very often involve the *orichas* themselves. Therefore, the myths can be said to be the biographies of the *orichas*. In their totality, they are said to explain everything that has existed, exists and will exist; ‘past, present and future’.

This absolute encompassment of everything could be defined as an extreme kind of transcendence and, in Holbraad and Willerslev’s terms, transcendental perspectivism. The *orichas* see in the myths themselves. This is their transcendental perspective. Divination is a process of discernment and relative individuation. From the totality of perspectives, divination filters those that are most relevant. The deities’ active involvement in this exchange of perspectives is to highlight the parts of their own biographies that correspond to the client. Thus, from just perceiving themselves, they now have to take into account the human that seeks their perspective. By doing

so, they choose the relevant part of their mythological biography without altering it. The *signo* that ‘comes out’ in divination ‘speaks’ of mythological events, not ones of the present. These events do not change, and if they are the deities’ perspectives, humans just glance at them. Their perspectives do not change in content; they change from the total to the particular. If humans through divination adopt the deities’ point of view, this is in a literal sense, where the former see what the latter see, not the other way round. People see bits of mythological biographies as such, bringing a ‘past’ cosmos into the present. It is their responsibility to understand and ‘interpret’ their lives through the lenses of that cosmos, not the cosmos’ to explain and give meaning to them. It is a ‘mytho-practical’ (c.f. Sahlins 1995) adoption of a perspective that is alter yet suggests its potential confluence with the ‘real-life’ situation of the divination’s client.

The Afro-Cuban spirit world, thus, presents us with characteristics of both models of perspectivism described by Holbraad and Willerslev. On the one hand *muertos* in general seem to adopt and offer ‘horizontal’ and ‘immanentist’ perspectives, while on the other, the *orichas* ‘vertical’ and ‘transcendental’. The inclusion of these two tendencies into one general spiritual whole—the ‘beyond’—also suggests that whereas the distinctions proposed by these authors form two kinds of perspectivism, in Cuba, they form two kinds of perspectival capacity into one unitary perspectivist whole; an Afro-Cuban perspectivism. The ‘beyond’ becomes a whole importantly through the mobilization of the exchange in perspectives. As with Amerindian perspectivism, the capacity to have a point of view is shared among humans and other-than-humans and what makes perspectives qualitatively different is their relation to their form, their body. The perspectival qualities of Afro-Cuban divination also reside in the fact that different kinds of ‘bodies’ have different perspectives but, unlike Amerindian perspectivism, during their exchange in divination they are also transformed in order to take into account the rest. Here, perspectives are not as radically different among them because they occupy radically different bodies, human and animal, as in Amazonia. The difference lies in that each entity, from humans to *muertos* to the *orichas*, varies in its degree of bodily-ness and, confluent with this, its degree of perspectival reach. The more

embodied the less oracular or far-reaching the perspective and, thus, in more need for another's perspective.

In order to strengthen the proposition of Afro-Cuban divination-as-perspectivism, I will now turn to three ethnographic instances where not only other-than-human perspectives are related to human ones, but also different other-than-human ones meet and relate among them.

Instance 1: consulting the *Ocha* oracle; the *muertos* interfere

Today I am invited by my friend Emilia, a *santera*, to attend a consultation with the *Ocha* oracle, the *dilogún*. The consultation will be done for a young woman who has been initiated by Emilia. The young woman had previously told Emilia that she was experiencing problems at home, especially with her husband with whom she was more frequently fighting with, often their child being the 'pretext', as she said. After the *dilogún* was cast and the relevant *signos* with their 'tendencies' had been revealed, Emilia proceeded into their interpretation. Emilia told her *ahijada* that she was a bit confused with what to make of the *signo*, although it clearly mentioned 'problems at home or with the family.' She explained, both to me and her, that one of the important things one has to fathom out for the *signos* was, first, which *patakín* ('story') best apply in the particular situation and, second, 'who is who' in actual life; in other words, how do the mythical characters correspond to the client and his or her environment. She added that it was almost clear to her which *patakín* corresponded to the situation, but that she was not sure about the 'who is who' part of it. She turned to her *ahijada* and told her: 'For that, I will need your help.' They started discussing the nature of the fights and the behaviour of her husband. At certain points, Emilia would ask specific questions as if there was already a hint about the situation (later on I realized that the hints were suggested by the *patakín* itself). For example, she asked whether their child was equally loved by both. She also wanted to know of each parent's behaviour towards the child, if it was caring or otherwise. During these questions I was puzzled by Emilia's persistence on wanting to know about the child. The fights between the two parents seemed to me to be the most central part of the 'issue'. For quite a while it seemed that no big advances were

being made towards clarification. Yet, during this seemingly trivial dialogue there was a moment when Emilia exclaimed in a decisive tone:

Hija mia [my daughter, a common expression that normally shows affect], I think there is something you are hiding from me. For all this time I've been trying to figure out what is going on. The signo that came out talks about family tragedy, treachery and death. Until now I thought that you were the victim but I suddenly realized that it's the opposite. Your poor husband is the victim of the story as indeed the patakín I have in mind relates. You are cheating on him and you want to make him feel responsible for the fights. Be careful because you are osogbo and things will turn out very negatively for you. You have to make a brave decision. You either leave him and go with this other man without blaming your husband, or stop seeing this other man because your husband might even try to kill you. In this signo the graves were born.

What previously seemed to be them beating around the bush with general questions and replies now turned into an almost authoritarian prescription of what the *ahijada* should do. She admitted cheating on her husband and, in a burst of tears, that Emilia was right; all the problems and fights resulted from that. She even admitted that she sometimes felt against her will, hatred towards her own child. Emilia concluded that there were no major ritual prescriptions to be given, no offerings, because the problem stemmed from her own actions and 'head' and that it was these as well that could give the solution. Nevertheless, she said that in order to 'refresh the head' (*refrescar la cabeza*) she would conduct a simple *rogación* (a ritual cleansing of the head) for her. When the young woman left the house I probed Emilia about this obvious (to me) change in the consultation, from the initial fuzziness to the abrupt clarity. Emilia told me that when she consults the *dilogún*, her *muertos* are always around and help her, especially with the 'interpretation' of the *signos*. She said that Ma' Tomasa, her old African *muerto*, was feeling annoyed with the *ahijada*'s partial honesty and interfered by telling Emilia exactly what was going on. Referring to Ma' Tomasa, Emilia told me:

She painted the patakín exactly as it is in the signo [*me pinto el patakín tal y como cual esta en el signo*]. In the beginning I thought that her husband was cheating on her, that she was the poor victim, but you see, Ma' Tomasa knows all the cunningness of the world.

Later on that day, when I had returned home, I consulted one of the widely shared 'manuals' of *Santería* to see if I could find any relevance to Emilia's consultation. I looked through the particular *signo* (called *Oddi Meyi*) that had come out that morning and I came across the following story (*patakín*). The story goes like this:

There was a time when corpses were not buried. In Oddi a hole had never been opened before; corpses were tied and then left at the feet of a ceiba tree. Mofa had a wife who said that she loved him a lot, that she would be lost if he were to die, that he was everything to her; but this was a lie. They had a son, but she didn't like children and she abused him, while Mofa was very caring and tender with him. All this occurred because she had an affair with another man, who, nevertheless, did not give her anything, he was not caring. While she would meet with this other man, she would tell him how bored and tired she was of Mofa, but when she was with Mofa, she would tell him how much she loved him. Her complaints against Mofa to the other man were so persistent, that one day he told her: 'Do you want to get rid of Mofa?' She replied 'Yes, in what way?' and he responded: 'You know that here corpses get tied and placed under the tree. Tonight pretend that you have died so that everybody comes to see you dead. They will tie you and leave you under the tree. I will come in the early hours of dawn and bring you to my house.' This is what Mofa's wife did, she faked being dead, they tied her and brought her to the tree, where the other man came early in the morning and took her to his house.

Various days passed after the event. Being a merchant, selling okra at the market, one day, the man thought of having Mofa's wife sell the okra, so that he could dedicate his time to other things. This is exactly what happened; he took the woman to the market and left her in charge of the business. As Mofa was left alone and didn't have anybody to assist him with the chores of the house, one day he sent his son to the market to buy some okra, and as the man's place was the only one that sold okra, the son ended up there. The boy was shocked to discover that his taken for dead mother was there selling okra. He cried 'Mama' and she said: 'I am not your mother.' The boy ran to his house and told his father what had occurred in the market. Mofa didn't believe him and the next day he sent his son once again to the market. This time the boy did the shopping without saying anything to his mother, but on arriving back at home he said his mother was at the market again. Mofa told his son that his mother had died and the boy said: 'Next time you go to the market and see for yourself', and so it happened. Mofa went to the market directly where the okra was being sold. His wife was busy and didn't see him arriving. Mofa recognised her immediately, he grabbed her and the woman started screaming in despair. Mofa also started yelling at her and soon a big crowd surrounded them. When there were enough people gathered around the event, Mofa explained to them how his wife had betrayed him and the crowd asked him to kill her. It was at that instant that Mofa proposed a distinct kind of death from those the village was used to.

Wishing to avoid a second trick by his wife, Mofa proposed digging a big hole in the ground and burying her alive. The village agreed, bearing in mind the gravity of the situation, a wife having betrayed in such manner her husband. Since then, corpses are buried rather than being tied and left at the feet of the ceiba tree [my translation].

The similarities between the mythical story and the issue of Emilia's *ahijada* are striking, something which is not always the case in consultations. Nevertheless, Emilia did not immediately match the mythological characters literally with the 'real' ones. As she implied, and as the tendency of the *signo* had been revealed to be *osogbo*, that is negative, the young woman could well have been in the position of the mythological husband and be the victim. Confusion lingered whilst Emilia's *muerto* took some time to 'paint' the frame in its detail and precision. If initially, the *Ocha* oracle reveals the *orichas'* perspective on the particular issue, theirs is a general perspective; a 'view from afar' that leaves humans (and *muertos*, as it later

proved) to figure out and fill in the exact details. It is here that Ma' Tomasa, detesting 'the cunningness of the world', interferes and gives her own perspective on the already laid down perspective of the *orichas*, which has come as a *signo* including a collection of advice, aphorisms and stories that need discernment and further particularization.

It is very common to meet such cases of divinatory or perspectival interference, if I may call it that, especially in the case of *Ocha* rather than *Ifá*. Indeed, the vast majority of *santeros* do not find it contradicting or conflictive for the *muertos* to be present in an *Ocha* consultation and giving their own perspectives on the *signos*. *Babalawos*, on the other hand, feel uneasy with such a phenomenon and do not (openly at least) admit any kind of interference on the part of the *muertos*. I have even heard from some that they actively try to neutralize the *muertos*' effects by conducting certain rituals, although I have not been able to confirm this. In any case, it seems that *babalawos* try to keep a distance from (overt) affective experiences, both from *muertos* and, even more so, from the *orichas*' ability to 'possess'. *Orula*, the patron deity of *Ifá*, is said to never 'possess' his children, the *babalawos*, as he is considered too big to fit in one's head. I think that much can be said about the distinctions that exist between *Ocha* and *Ifá* (for an interesting discussion, see Brown 2003a). For example, the content of the *signos* also differs, as in *Ifá* there is a predominance of stories which relate *Orula*'s adventures or those of mythical *babalawos* or of the mythical characters consulting *Orula* and his oracle. Also, *Ifá* is much more male dominated as traditionally full initiation is permitted only to men. Although there has been a relatively recent 'revolution' initiated by a small group of *Ifá* priests who admit women into full initiation (the so-called *iyanifá* issue), the typical *babalawo* figure is that of a male, who does not get possessed and is not an *espiritista*. Thus, up to an extent and on certain occasions the body (and its affective capacities) is feminized, while the more 'intellectual' interpretation of material oracles is stereotypically attributed to men. What interests me here, though, is this potentiality of different perspectives co-existing and feeding each other in, what is deemed as such, productive, complementary and, even, necessary ways. It is because they are (experienced as) different that they may become related.

Instance 2: a *muerto* leading to *Ocha*

Celia, who has already appeared in chapter 3, has been involved in *la religión* for a long time, and has managed to create quite a broad circle of *ahijados* ('godchildren') and, in general, people who seek her help and advice. Her very first 'religious experiences' (*experiencias religiosas*) were of a spontaneous and not so conscious nature. From a very young age, she tells me, she had 'visions' (*visions*) or 'appearances' (*apariencias*) of *muertos*. She particularly remembers when she first 'met' Francisca at the age of eight. At first, she would see her as a 'mute image [*una imagen sin sonido*]' of a tall and pretty middle-aged African woman. Although in the beginning little Celia would be perplexed about this 'spectral image' (*imagen espectral*), she never felt fear, 'as if this woman was part of my family, although I had never known her before as a real person.' As I see it, it was a kind of proximity which was sensed as intimacy without this stemming from a conscious and pre-established relationship. The eight-year Celia did not speak to anyone about her 'visions', yet, she started talking to the 'visions' themselves:

It was like a game, really. You know, kids create their own fantasy worlds. They put dolls to converse with each other, they create caves with creatures behind the sofas, and they have invisible friends and attend to them as if they were real. Francisca was my own invisible, although not so much fantastic as it later proved, friend. When we were alone, I would start talking to her; prepare her coffee to share with me and my dolls. She would sit in silence in one corner and occasionally smile at me. Although I was not exactly conscious and sure of what was going on, I always knew that there was something more real to her than my dolls and my various imaginations.

As Celia was growing, her relation with the 'vision' grew as well. After two years of constant 'visions', which gradually became more vivid wherein the 'spectre' would interact more, according to Celia (for instance, she would appear for longer times and 'move more freely' in the house), Celia remembers very intensely the day the 'vision' talked. It told her: 'Don't you worry Celia; your grandma is here with me. She is fine and she sends her love to you.' Her grandmother had died that same year and Celia had been deeply affected by the event. Although she did not have 'visions' of her, through the recently talking 'vision', she started receiving 'small messages' (*pequeños mensajes*) from her, such as the one mentioned above. Celia, triggered by the *muerto*'s suggestion, even started lighting candles for her deceased grandmother. It was at about this time that she also got to know the *muerto*'s name; she was called

Francisca. This is an interesting case where the perspective of one *muerto* is adopted through (that of) another. Nevertheless, what concerns me here is the juxtaposition of perspectives, not between two different *muertos*, but that between two different kinds of entities, a *muerto* and an *oricha*; the juxtaposition, in other words, of two different kinds of perspectives.

Celia, as we have seen, began developing her relation with Francisca from a very young age, when she barely knew anything about *la religión*, as she stressed. Gradually, Francisca began to flesh out in a more complete form. From an anonymous, silent and quasi-static ‘vision’, she became more ‘mobile’, she produced sounds and words, a name, and a biography and at the same time she became part of Celia’s biography. As Celia began to acknowledge Francisca’s presence (initially by talking to her ‘as kids do’ and gradually getting from Francisca replies, and passing on messages), the latter, in her turn, began to communicate to her ‘things’ that concerned Celia’s life. At various times she would warn her against an imminent misfortune or reveal a hidden state of affairs. Celia’s family would be impressed by the child’s prodigious and extraordinary capacity. Francisca had also revealed to Celia that she would play an important role in *la religión* and would come to have ‘a big crowd’ (*un pueblo grande*; meaning lots of people becoming her ‘godchildren’ and seeking her help). Celia recollects how she felt a strong attraction to the sea and everything that had to do with it. Interestingly, she directly links this with her relation to Francisca.

Francisca always appeared dressed in blue. At times she appeared holding beautiful big sea-shells Celia had never seen in her life. Since then Celia, whenever she had the chance, would collect shells that attracted her attention. As years went by and well into her twenties, Celia became involved in *Espiritismo*, through which she could develop ‘properly’ and more consciously her relation with Francisca (as well as other *muertos* of hers). It was during this period that Francisca revealed to her that she would soon be initiated in *Santería* and would eventually take a leading and successful role in it. Even more specifically, Francisca, during a *misa espiritual* (similar to the one I described in chapter 3), in a phantasmagorical event of possession made the above suggestions ‘clear as water’ (*claro como el agua*). Celia tells me:

Francisca descended [*bajó*] and took possession of me [*tomó posesión de mí*], as she sometimes does in misas espirituales. She said that while in life she was a mischievous character and a free spirit. Although she had been brought up in an environment submerged into la religión and was constantly warned to consult the orichas and pay heed to what they say, she always forgot or postponed it and eventually died without fulfilling her camino. Hers was a camino de santo [a path to the saint, meaning the need to get initiated in *Santería*], with Yemayá as her patron-oricha. This is the reason why she got attached to me, because I was also a legitimate daughter [*hija legítima*, meaning that she is without doubt a person belonging to that particular *oricha*] of Yemayá, and her mission as a muerto was partially to lead me to the feet of Yemayá. While as I was mounted [*montada*, an alternative term for possessed] with Francisca, I started spinning around with loud laughs, and I ended up dancing exactly as Yemayá does. I don't know if Yemayá mounted me momentarily or not but it was very strong [*muy fuerte*, meaning very real, very intense]. When Francisca left my body, the people present at the misa told me what had happened and I immediately promised myself and Francisca that I would take the necessary steps as soon as possible.

Indeed, Celia did not waste time. She visited an old *santero* friend of hers, who consulted the *Ocha* oracle. The *dilogún* confirmed *Yemayá's* 'affinity' with Celia, but also told her that for a definite verification she would have to consult *Ifá*. This is when Celia decided to 'take' (*coger*) the 'hand of Orula' (*mano de Orula*), an initiation conducted by *babalawos* which importantly involves a divination wherein one acquires permanent *signos* that mark his or her *camino* and also obtains knowledge of what kinds of initiations (if needed at all) and to which particular *orichas* will have to undergo. The *mano de Orula* divination confirmed both the need to get initiated and that the *oricha* claiming Celia's head was indeed *Yemayá*.

In this account, we are presented with another occasion of perspectivist interference and transference. Celia is experiencing the presence of Francisca as a gradual process of increasing intimacy and reciprocity. The dramatic incident at the *misa espiritual* revealed *Yemayá's* wishes and expectations through Francisca, who, even more interestingly, had also obligations towards *Yemayá*, albeit left unfulfilled. Her *camino* as *muerto* (her 'necrography') was moulded and affected by these unfinished businesses and her relation and affinity with Celia was constituted on precisely this premise. That this should be the case is made clearer by the fact that, as Celia told me, after getting initiated as a daughter of *Yemayá*, Francisca's possessions diminished considerably and eventually disappeared. Celia, since then, would experience Francisca in other more subtle ways and makes sure to point out to me that Francisca's spirit, through her own initiation, has acquired more light and evolved spiritually. It is also interesting, I believe, that Celia introduces, as gradually as her relation with, first, Francisca and, second, *Yemayá*, the term *camino* as

becoming a somewhat more complete and encompassing 'entity'. Hers, being a *camino de santo* and strongly linked to playing an active role in *la religión*, and (getting initiated as daughter of) *Yemayá* becomes a sort of end achieved by means of (and through) Francisca.

Instance 3: the *palero* who remained with his *nfumbi*

The last ethnographic instance is an account of the relation between a *palero*, Guzmán, and his *nfumbi*. Guzmán became initiated (*rayado*, in *Palo* terms) in *Palo* at a very turbulent period of his life. Having studied photography and English literature, his dream was to become a professional photographer; more specifically an artistic photographer. He started off as the former, mainly getting small and occasional jobs in journalistic photography and at social events, such as weddings and celebrations. The more artistic part would have to wait for the time being and be satisfied as merely a hobby. But even the less creative jobs he would occasionally obtain would prove hard to find, and he found it difficult to earn enough money to get by, especially in a context, as the Cuban is, where private initiative was and still is extremely regulated and restricted. After some hard years, Guzmán was presented with a great opportunity to finally fulfil his bigger dream by participating in an artistic competition, the three finalists of which would be offered a relatively generous fund and work on a project organized by the Ministry of Culture. As he was preparing his portfolio for the competition, a devastating event occurred. The place where he developed his photos caught fire, burning all of his photographs and films which he intended to submit to the competition. This all happened just two days before the deadline.

After this, Guzmán felt so desperate and at a dead end that he decided to exit the country, towards the USA via a common but illicit and life-claiming, for many Cubans, route: the (in)famous *balsa* ('raft').²⁵ Once more, Guzmán's misfortune prevented him from achieving his goal. The plan was to escape from the North-West part of Cuba, but was aborted at the last moment as it proved that the police and the coastguards had obtained certain intelligence of the event and was present on the

²⁵ *Balsas* are often home-made, and serve as a passage to close by countries such as North America, Mexico, Jamaica, the Dominican Republic or Haiti.

spot. Guzmán's series of misfortunes left him perplexed and wondering whether there was a common and hidden origin behind them all. He was seriously suspecting either a case of *brujería* or 'unpaid duties towards the beyond', as he called it, or both. It is very common for *religiosos* to believe that by fulfilling their 'duties towards the beyond' they are granted certain levels of *protecciones* ('protections'), not only from a possible dissatisfaction on the part of the entities and the beyond (which is definitely a reason for misfortune), but also from *brujería*, which may (and most often does so) involve other-than-human entities, but ones that are 'contracted' by a certain individual—an enemy—and not ones which are in a more permanent and internal way related to the person.

Guzmán was not a complete stranger to *la religión*, although he had never undergone any kind of initiation; and this was exactly the reason why his suspicions arose. Nevertheless, 'I always had my little things [*siempre tuve mis cositas*]', as he tells me. This expression which you can occasionally hear from Cubans both reveals and hides. It reveals that there is a kind of intimate relation established with the beyond, which also implies relations with specific (kinds of) entities, often materialized literally in the acquisition of certain (consecrated) 'things'. The 'beyond' very rarely stands for an abstract conception of and relation with a divine force; it is almost always referring to particular entities and relations with them. The beyond 'hides' a multiplicity of entities and forces. Yet, in its initial and apparent generality, the expression employed by Guzmán *does not* reveal on its own *which* specific entities and, by extension, religious traditions one is attached to, neither the degree. Be that as it may, he was keen on revealing more details. His 'little things' were an unexplored yet quite frequent ability to sense spirits of the dead. This raw talent of his gave him every now and then advice, warnings and predictions about his life along with getting intimate with the identities and biographies of his *muertos*. Yet, he was following things intuitively, in his 'own way' (*a mi manera*, another common Cuban expression describing the relation with the beyond) without pursuing more ritualized and formal paths, through *Espiritismo* for instance. This is what he retrospectively (after the occurrence of the misfortunes) interpreted as the partial reason for not having been warned by his *muertos* against them (the misfortunes). He thus decided to 'investigate' (*investigar*) the issue at depth. He started visiting

religiosos, friends or those recommended to him by them, and he was led to a large number of diviners. As he was highly confused as to what was going on, he felt the need to exhaust the range of possible origins as much as he could. He consequently visited *santeros*, *babalawos*, *espiritistas* and *paleros*. After a long process of ‘investigation’—of double-checking information and establishing bonds of trust with certain diviners—he managed to put, in what to him seemed as, an order to this chaos the beyond had formerly been presenting him with.

He was informed that he did not have any ‘unpaid duties’ towards the *orichas*. His was a path that did not involve a *camino de santo* or *Ifá*, meaning that he did not have to undergo any major initiation in *Ocha/Ifá*. This was interpreted as positive, as far as the *orichas* were concerned, and that, essentially, he had not ‘deviated’ (*desviar*) from his broader *camino* or destiny. If this was the case, then why the misfortunes, the answer begged the question. It was then that Guzmán painstakingly discovered what his particular relation with the beyond was and, thus, what his *camino* held for him. First, he initiated a more intimate relationship with his *muertos* through *Espiritismo*. As he started ‘developing’, he acquired more detailed information *about* them and also *from* them. One of his *muertos*, who had been a powerful *palero* while in life, revealed to him that his misfortunes resulted from *brujería*, which had been ‘sent’ by his former wife. The *muerto* also strongly insisted on seeking the help of a (living) *palero*. Guzmán sought it and the above revelation was indeed confirmed. Additionally, the *palero* told him that his situation was so grave and the *brujería* so ‘strong’ (*fuerte*) that he would have to get *rayado* (initiated in *Palo*) and obtain his own *nganga*. He did so under the *palero*’s supervision and guidance. With the second *rayamiento* and the subsequent acquisition of his own *nganga*, Guzmán initiated a close relationship with a kind of *muerto* people normally try to avoid or ignore, the *nfumbi*. The ‘pact’ was made in the deep night-hours at the *Cementerio de Colón*, the main and largest cemetery of Havana, after bribing the night-guard. Guzmán, as many *paleros*, did not wish to reveal details of how he acquired the *nfumbi* nor of his identity. What he did tell me though—which I think is enlightening of the transference of perspectives I am dealing with in this chapter—is that it was his *nfumbi* who led him divine through the oracle of the *orichas*, although in a quite idiosyncratic way.

Although Guzmán does not call the oracle *dilogún* neither does he claim that it invokes the *orichas* directly to ‘speak’ through it, he has clearly adopted—almost appropriated—the form of the *Santería* oracle. For example, he employs 16 cowrie shells which work exactly as those in *Ocha*, forming oracular signs which depend on the combination of those that fall ‘mouth-up’ and ‘mouth-down’. Furthermore, the same techniques of deciding the either positive (*iré*) or negative (*osogbo*) tendency of the *signo* is followed; and the *signos* are those of *Ocha*, containing the same or similar warnings, advice and myths. Although he has spent time in ‘studying’ the *signos* and their content in *Santería* manuals, the initial and most efficacious, according to him, knowledge of them were taught to Guzmán by the *nfumbi*: ‘It is him [the *nfumbi*] who puts them into my mind, in front of my eyes’, he says, ‘And most importantly it works; I have seen results, I have seen truths, and people are impressed.’ He adds that through the *chamalongo*—the name of the oracle in *Palo* terms—the *mpungos* (*Palo*’s deities) ‘speak’ (correlating them with the equivalent *orichas*), but also his *nfumbi*. Unlike the first ethnographic instance, where a *muerto* added more detailed and particularized information during the interpretation of *Ocha*’s *signos*, in this case the *nfumbi* provides the *signos* themselves and their myths in the first place, something which from a pure *Ocha*-centric point of view would be deemed as unacceptable, unless the adequate initiations had taken place.

This could be a story of appropriation of perspectives and not just a peaceful adoption and exchange of them. The *nfumbi*, in a sense, has appropriated the *orichas*’ perspectives, their mythological biographies and transfers them to Guzmán without him having undergone any *Ocha* initiation and neither having it in his *camino*. Nevertheless, for him, ‘it works’, implying that the ‘beyond’ of the Afro-Cuban cosmos is experienced as an efficacious retrieval of perspectives through divination and actions that follow it. In fact, whatever is rendered efficacious and gives ‘results’ (*resultados*) and ‘proofs’ (*pruebas*) is deemed as being the ‘beyond’ and not so much the other way round.

In this last part of the chapter, I hope I have given a clearer and broader idea of the Afro-Cuban ‘beyond’ and its various entities, which do not only engage in exchanging perspectives with humans, but, as the ethnographic examples illustrated, between themselves as well. Indeed, it is this efficacy of this very ‘beyond’ that lies

at the heart of this thesis—an efficacy which both manifests and instantiates the exchange of different ‘points of view’.

CONCLUSION

Thus, to summarize my argument and emphasize its theoretical implications in a more explicit fashion, my understanding of Afro-Cuban divination as a form of perspectivism is predicated on the way in which the movement from immanence to transcendence—for the dead—and from transcendence to immanence—for the deities—can also be seen as a movement from embodiment to disembodiment and vice versa. Although, in both cases, it is the body that allows the exchange of different ‘points of view’, this body is constituted and introduced in the ‘perspectivist game’ in rather different ways—that is, while for the dead it is the point of departure, for the deities it is the point of arrival. In the case of *muertos*, it is the affective nature of their presence—in and of itself a material trace of their (ex)bodily-ness—that allows their being there to be felt and their knowledge to be shared. More than this, their very presence instantiates and manifests but one stage in their quest for eventual transcendence and disembodiment; a quest, the success of which necessitates the cooperation of humans and, as we saw at the end of the previous chapter, deities—in other words, the incorporation of other points of view in the appropriate forms of (de)materialization, exemplified, perhaps, by the ‘affine’ *muertos* and, consequently, *Espiritismo*.

By contrast, rather than stemming from bodily traces and a quest for disembodiment, the deities’ ‘point of view’ needs to be *traced* in and through the material entanglement of the appropriate *signos*—that is, it needs to be embodied. Moving from transcendence to immanence, this process of partial embodiment (so as to preserve their transcendental perspectival reach) is realized in exactly the same way that the infinite possibilities embedded in the various *patakín* and their myths are particularized in the materialization of particular *oddu* and their eventual interpretation—if the right ‘tendency’ is to be determined, the right ‘mouth’ must speak and, above all, be listened to in the right way.

Of course, within the various divinatory practices, these different perspectives are nothing more than different ‘motile’ points (from transcendence to immanence and vice versa) of seeing the same world—a world of (crossing and) crossed

destinies, or *caminos*. Indeed, echoing Holbraad and Willerslev's take on the difference between Amerindian and Inner Asian 'perspectivism', the articulation of these 'points of view' within Afro-Cuban divination could be described as reflecting the mutual implication of the 'view from everywhere' and the 'view from somewhere'—that is, to use the terms of my own ethnographic analysis, the point of view of the deities and the point of view of the dead respectively. Perhaps—to return to the first chapter where I mentioned Turner and his work on Ndembu divination as this was reconstructed in terms of content through Horton—the difference between what the deities and the dead 'see' and reveal can also be rendered as involving more specific and intimate points in the flow of life or, else, *camino* (in the case of the dead), and the flow itself, as a whole (in the case of the deities).

In any case, by focusing on the possible connection between divination and the efficacy of different 'points of view', I hope I have contributed both to a better understanding of Cuban ethnography and to showing a possible avenue for a broader reach of perspectivism. I have tried to describe both the flow of life and its intimate specificities in order to remain faithful to indigenous perceptions of the other-than-human entities through divination. In this way, I hope that I have managed to articulate in a satisfactory way what I have set out to do; that is, engage with Afro-Cuban ethnography outside the conventional box and rather than placing the emphasis on traditions or clearly demarcated sets of beliefs and practices, often studied in relative isolation, illuminated the complexities of a plural 'beyond'. A 'beyond' that, due to its plurality, is rich and complex, but not arbitrary and neither uncritically open to transformation nor strictly closed to its past. A general aim was to approach the inhabitants of this beyond—the other-than-human entities—as they make their appearance through instances of divination, where they offer their perspectives on humans' *caminos* but also, and inseparably from the last, their perspectives of themselves and their own *camino*. Furthermore, these perspectives are not mere utterances and oracular pronouncements that float into the 'thin air' of the divinatory contexts, but motivate people into actions that are meant to fulfil and realign their *camino* and harness the latter as the other-than-human entities harness their own. This tight—'ontological'—bond between human and other-than-human

caminos is what compelled me to ultimately compare divination with perspectivism and explore their potential affinities.

Before doing so, I dealt with the category of ‘immanence and transcendence’ to show the ‘space’ in which the various *caminos* acquire a motion with a direction and also argue that too much proximity—immanence—and too much distance—transcendence—have similar effects (but dissimilar affects!), which amount to the (con)fusion or disappearance of perspectives and, thus, endanger their potential to be exchanged and related. It is only the motion within this ‘space’ that mobilizes the perspectival and oracular potentials. Different kinds of other-than-human entities move in different directions and this produces their unique point of view on human *caminos*.

Like ‘Amerindian’ perspectivism, the ‘body’ creates the difference in perspectives while the ‘spirit’ is the general capacity to have a perspective; a point of view. But unlike its Amerindian manifestation, the bodies of other-than-humans are not as clearly demarcated as those of animals and, thus, their perspectives although different, in their exchange they transform so as to enter into dialogue with each other. Their ‘bodies’ are also defined by their relation to the ‘absence’ of them; *muertos* as ex-human bodies and *orichas* as non-bodies, and therefore able to diffuse themselves to a multiplicity of ‘bodies’ and ‘objects’, such as their oracles. The perspectival qualities of Afro-Cuban divination are thus concentrating on the beyond of the body, and it is there that ‘the beyond’ resides. The various kinds of entities can be said to initially occupy a radically different point of view from that of humans as is the case with Amerindian perspectivism. Deities ‘see’ their own biographies in the myths; *muertos* in their ‘alien’ or undeveloped condition ‘see’ themselves, in a confused condition, as still alive. Divination, by creating a link between human and other-than-human *caminos* transforms the latter’s radically different points of views in different yet relevant and related ways to the deities. Thus, both sides transform in the process. Furthermore, the Afro-Cuban ethnography seems to be offering a case where the distinction made by Holbraad and Willerslev, between Amerindian and Inner Asian perspectivism, comes to form a (perspectival) whole—namely, the Afro-Cuban ‘beyond’.

Of course, by focusing on the connection between divination and perspectivism, I have ignored a plethora of other possible connections. For instance, I have not engaged with issues of politics, collective memory, the everyday preoccupations of Cubans, discourses on morality, and national identity. This has been a conscious choice and not in the least because they are not relevant. The Afro-Cuban cosmos is part of Cuba's broader past, present and future and cannot be easily extricated from it. Although there have been valuable attempts to bring them together, by doing so, they seem to distance themselves from these very indigenous definitions I have painstakingly and, somewhat, stubbornly tried to pursue.²⁶ Although their merit is beyond doubt as they attempt to go 'beyond the search for origins' (Palmié 2008) that characterized older generations of scholars, such as Bascom, Herskovits and the (early at least) Ortiz, and highlight a more active role of them as shaping and being shaped by the present (as well as re-shaping the past), they also focus on this 'present' in a very specific way. In other words, the various traditions, with their different other-than-human entities, ceremonies and cosmological backgrounds become different ways and tools—'epistemology'—to deal with politics, collective memory, the everyday, and so on. This, in its turn, serves as a method in order to render familiar these apparently 'exotic' practices and beliefs through the assumption that the rest of the categories ('politics, memory, the everyday, and so on') *are* familiar to start with.

Alternatively, and parallel to my attempts to go beyond the barren paths of 'syncretic' (where differences are dissolved into similarities) or 'pure' (where differences are perceived as oppositions and are, thus, mutually excluded) traditions, I ventured on highlighting the various instances the Afro-Cuban cosmos and its entities are enmeshed in, what Lambek identifies as, the 'poiesis' (2002:135) of the world; a world constituted of 'things, 'words' and 'entities' and vice versa, and not, as I mentioned in chapter 1, again in reference to Lambek, the latter being mere 'responses *to* it' (2002:8). In this sense, the other-than-human entities and their perspectives are neither mere responses to the social world of 'politics, the everyday,

²⁶ For such accounts, see, for example, Ayorinde 2004; Hearn 2008; Miller 2000; Moore C. 1986, 1988; Moore R. 2004; Palmié 1995a, 1995b, 2001, 2002, 2006, 2007, 2008; Román 2007a, 2007b; Routon 2006, 2009; Sigler 2005; Wirtz 2004, 2007.

and so on', and thus the (Afro-Cuban) cosmos is not separate from (Cuban) society (see Lambek 2002:9).

By hastily saying that divination has, for instance, its politics (which of course it has, as well as politics has its divinations) and exhaust the discussion there, it may therefore prove to be a cheap intellectual investment in both divination and politics, because, through its illusionary promise of making them more tangible and concrete, it alienates us from both. Taking seriously both, may require from us patience and a rather prolonged suspension of our intuitive interpretative assumptions. It may also require from us, in order to do them justice, to treat them separately for a while, even if this 'while' proves to be as long as a whole Ph.D. thesis. But I would like to hope that this can create a more productive chance for future projects that would—as I did with the various kinds of other-than-human entities—compare them, in their differences and interconnections, on more equal and dialogical terms, and not reduce the one to the other. With this in mind, my approach was by no way meant to overcast a shadow over the rest by arguing that all should resemble it. This is not a call for a total(itarian) turn to 'metaphysics' where history, politics, national identity, for example, vanish out of the picture; but it is, nevertheless, a call for giving voice to this indigenous 'metaphysics', especially when the former (history, politics, and so on), willingly or not, tend to make the latter vanish or become—in a highly structural-functional way—means of achieving their own ends.

Specifically, as far as politics are concerned, Cuba is by definition an interesting place as it presents us with a not so commonly encountered example of living 'socialism'. As for this, the reader could excuse me for not providing too much information of life under and inside socialism. Many scholars, especially anthropologists whose discourse depends on having access to Cuba's physical space—to *be there*—are met with the many ambiguities of the situation. From the very beginning I came to realize that 'Afro-Cuban religions' are not, on their own, a 'sensitive' topic, whereas 'politics' are. This has its effects on the academic discourse produced and often leads to an almost self-inflicted censorship in being explicitly political about Cuba (but, see Chávez 2005; Gropas 2007; Holbraad 2011; Kapcia 1992; Lewis *et.al.* 1977a, 1977b, 1978; Moore 1986, 1988; Rosendahl 1997;

Tanuma 2007). The most famous example is that of Oscar Lewis, when he and his collaborators were initially granted official access to Cuba to conduct research on everyday life under the Revolution, but finally, and after their first publications came to light (1977a, 1977b, 1978), they were, officially again, deprived of it. There is always the latent fear, real or imagined, that being explicitly political could compromise the very access of the researcher to the field (if the tendency is to be highly critical) or to be caught in the middle of the bigger (post-) Cold War debates—‘capitalism versus communism’—that have so much affected political and historical accounts on the Cuban Revolution. But, as I said before and in relation to the Afro-Cuban religious traditions, there is also the danger of reading the phenomena I dealt with only through the socio-political context and nothing else, which could be compromising a broader reach of the ‘anthropological imagination’.

Another ‘theme’ left out of the thesis was a comparative look at similar phenomena elsewhere. The most obvious ones would be regions of Latin America and the Caribbean with a strong ‘African’ presence, such as Brazil, Trinidad, Haiti, and Jamaica. Similar phenomena have taken place in these countries and my decision to leave them untouched could be seen as an omission.²⁷ Here again, my reasoning is akin to the one repeatedly made throughout the thesis. By putting the emphasis on the ontological dimensions of these phenomena, I consciously and heuristically suspended a geographical and socio-historical rendition of them into, first, traditions and, second, culturally specific wholes. A cross examination on the relevant bibliography reveals similar pitfalls as the ones I have detected in the Cuban scholarship, thus my contribution is meant to implicitly refer to but also go beyond them too. Furthermore, and more importantly, the general contribution of this thesis I hope is to have been a challenging approach to ‘religious’, ‘syncretic’ and ‘divinatory’ phenomena in general, through the invaluable analytical help of ‘perspectivism’ and, at the same time, an effort to go beyond the latter’s ethnographic ‘Amerindian’ particularities so as to contribute to it as well and stretch its theoretical reach.

²⁷ For similar phenomena elsewhere, see, for example, Baca *et.al.* 2009; Barnes 1989; Brown 1986; Crahan and Knight 1979; Falola and Childs 2004; Greenfield and Droogers 2001; Matory 2005; Simpson 1978.

I, thus, engaged with this (Afro-Cuban) ‘propensity’ to invoke, discover and seek oracular ‘signs’ that could have their own distinctive perspectives. Ambitious, convincing, interesting, and challenging or not, these were the limits and strengths of this thesis: divination and its various ‘signs’.

Normally, the term ‘saturation’ in Anthropology comes to denote a sense of fullness that is produced after a prolonged period of fieldwork and the collection of ethnographical data that promise a satisfactory pool from which the researcher can draw from and produce anthropological texts. In the context of writing up a Ph.D. thesis, the sense is much more intense (with all its negative and positive affects) long after fieldwork and towards the completion of the text itself. For this thesis this moment has (finally!) arrived. As the saturation affect has reached its peak, I call to my assistance the author that has inspired the title of this thesis and whose words also served to open it:

Situated in the external zone of the Milky Way, the Sun takes about two hundred million years to make a complete revolution of the galaxy.

[O]nce, as I went past, I drew a sign at a point in space, just so I could find it again two hundred million years later, when we went by the next time around. What sort of sign? It’s hard to explain because if I say sign to you, you immediately think of a something that can be distinguished from a something else, but nothing could be distinguished from anything there [...]. As to the form a sign should have, you say it’s no problem because, whatever form it may be given, a sign only has to serve as a sign, that is, be different or else the same as other signs: here again it’s easy for you young ones to talk, but in that period I didn’t have any examples to follow, I couldn’t say I’ll make it the same or I’ll make it different, there were no things to copy [...]. In other words, considering it was the first sign ever made in the universe, or at least in the circuit of the Milky Way, I must admit it came out very well. Visible? What a question! Who had eyes to see with in those days? Nothing had ever been seen by anything, the question never even arose. Recognizable, yes, beyond any possibility of error: because all the other points in space were the same, indistinguishable, and instead, this one had the sign on it (Calvino 2010:32-33).

And after two hundred million years had passed and the Sun had made its ‘revolution’:

In the universe now there was no longer a container and a thing contained, but only a general thickness of signs superimposed and coagulated, occupying the whole volume of space; it was constantly being dotted, minutely, a network of lines and scratches and reliefs and engravings; the universe was scrawled over on all sides, along all its dimensions. There was no longer any way to establish a point of reference: the galaxy went on turning but I could no longer count the revolutions, any point could be the point of departure, any sign heaped up with the other could be mine, but discovering it would have served no purpose, because it was clear that, independent of signs, space didn’t exist and perhaps had never existed (Calvino 2010:41-42).

Glossary

- Afinidad*—Affinity
Ahijado (fem. *ahijada*)—Godchild
Babalawo—Priest initiated in the *Ifá* tradition
Brujería—Witchcraft, sorcery
Brujo (fem. *bruja*)—Witch, sorcerer
Camino—Path
Destino—Destiny
Dilogún—Oracle of the *Ocha* or, else, *Santería* tradition
Espiritista—Person communicating with the spirits of the dead, normally through the *Espiritismo* tradition
Iré—Positive ‘tendency’ of an oracular sign
Madrina—Godmother
Muerto—(Spirit of the) dead
Nfumbi—Spirit of the dead pertaining to the *Palo (Monte)* tradition
Nganga—Receptacle, often an iron cauldron, containing the *nfumbi*, among others
Oddu—Oracular sign
Oricha—Deity of the *Ocha/Ifá* or, else, *Santería* tradition
Osogbo—Negative ‘tendency’ of an oracular sign
Padrino—Godfather
Palero (fem. *palera*)—Person initiated in *Palo (Monte)*
Prenda (Sp.)—*Nganga* in the *Palo* idiom
Santero (fem. *santera*)—Person initiated in *Ocha* or, else, *Santería*
Santo (fem. *santa*)—Saint
Signo (Sp.)—(Oracular) sign

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